DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 419 310 CG 027 836

AUTHOR Shilts, Gerald R.
TITLE Brief Counseling That Works: A Solution-Focused Approach for School Counselors. Practical Skills for Counselors.
REPORT NO ISBN-0-8039-6467-6
PUB DATE 97
NOTE 134p.
AVAILABLE FROM Corwin Press, Inc., 2455 Teller Rd., Thousand Oaks, CA 91320-2218 (paperback: ISBN-0-8039-6467-6, $19.95; cloth: ISBN-0-8039-6468-4, $37.95).
PUB TYPE Books (010) -- Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; *Behavior Modification; Children; *Counseling Effectiveness; Counseling Objectives; *Counseling Techniques; Elementary School Students; Elementary Secondary Education; Group Therapy; Intervention; *School Counseling; School Counselors; Secondary School Students
IDENTIFIERS *Brief Therapy; Counselor Effectiveness; *Solution Focused Brief Therapy

ABSTRACT

School counselors often face large caseloads of students and cannot spend hours of time addressing each student's problems using traditional approaches. With this in mind, step-by-step instructions on how to use solution-focused brief counseling (SFBC) with elementary and secondary students is provided here. School counselors can utilize this approach for typical student concerns in order to achieve rapid, observable change. School administrators and teachers will also benefit because each component of this approach can be used independently in a variety of situations. School psychologists, social workers, pastoral counselors, and drug counselors should find the case studies especially relevant. The book is intentionally short and theory is discussed briefly; implementation is the main thrust. The reader is led through the material, then practice exercises appear at the end of the first four chapters. Chapter 1 presents the background and rational for SFBC and its special relevance to school counseling. Chapter 2 discusses ways to prepare students for solution-based counseling and how to facilitate the initial goal-setting phase of the model. Chapter 3 describes how to teach students to recognize success and thus be encouraged. Chapter 4 provides a transcript of a student case, and chapter 5 covers the interventions counselors employ in second and subsequent interviews with students. Chapter 6 describes additional applications of the solution-focused approach. Contains an index. (RJM)

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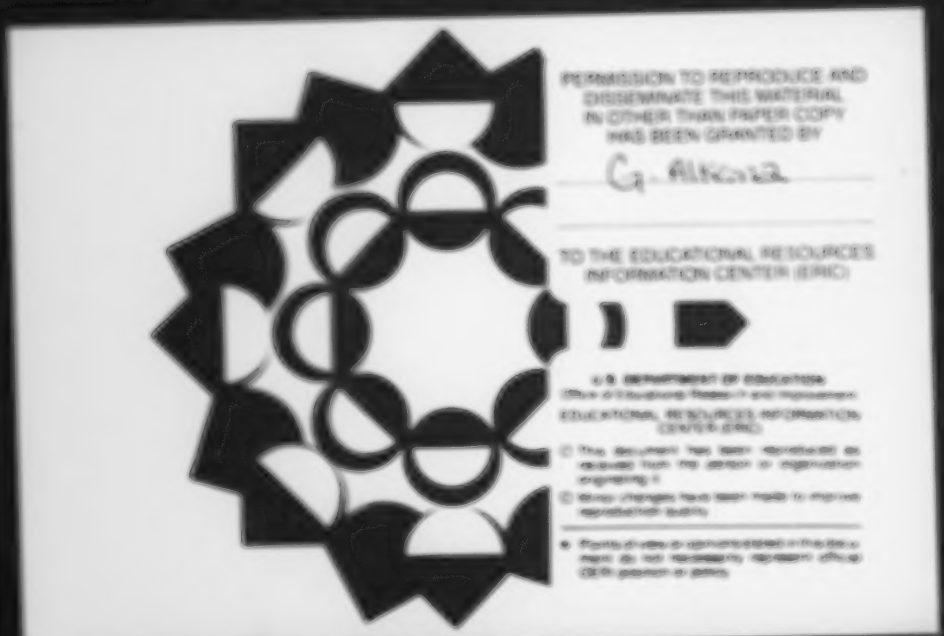
A Solution-Focused Approach for School Counselors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For information address:

Corwin Press, Inc.
A Sage Publications Company
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
E-mail: order@corwin.sagepub.com

SAGE Publications Ltd.
6 Bonhill Street
London EC2A 4PU
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
M-32 Market
Greater Kailash I
New Delhi 110 048 India

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sklare, Gerald B.
Brief counseling that works : a solution-focused approach for school counselors / author, Gerald B. Sklare.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8039-6467-6 (pbk.). — ISBN 0-8039-6466-8 (cloth)
1. Educational counseling. 2. Solution-focused therapy. 3. Short-term counseling. I. Title.
LB1027.5.S486 1997
371.4'6—dc21 96-45867

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

97 98 99 00 01 02 03 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Editorial Assistant Janet Westenberg
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Typesetter/Designer Danielle Dillahunt
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Cover Designer Marcia R. Finlayson

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Preface

This book provides step-by-step instruction in how to use solution-focused brief counseling (SFBC) with elementary and secondary students. School counselors in particular will be able to relate to the typical student concerns presented. School administrators and teachers will also benefit, because each component of this approach can be used independently in a variety of situations. Other professionals—school psychologists, social workers, pastoral counselors, licensed professional counselors, and drug counselors—who work with youth both in and out of the school environment will find the case studies especially relevant. The skill of conducting solution-talk discussions with students can help educators reduce arguments, improve relationships, and teach young people to assume responsibility and make better decisions in a supportive environment.

The book is intentionally short. Theory is discussed briefly; however, implementation is the main thrust. My approach is to lead the reader through the material one step at a time, including practice exercises at the end of the first four chapters. I seek to provide the knowledge necessary to apply SFBC with children and youth.

SFBC is a recent, innovative approach ideally suited for schools because it overcomes many of the pitfalls that often impede school

counselors. With caseloads often exceeding 500 students, counselors can devote little time to providing students with longer-term, traditional counseling. It is no wonder that school counselors face a dilemma—counselor education programs typically emphasize counseling theories that may be difficult to use under circumstances encountered in schools. Today more than ever, counselors need a focused approach suitable for a range of problems.

Solution-focused counseling is timely for other reasons as well. Recent trends in education are giving teachers and parents more control in staffing schools through site-based decision making. In the past, school counselors tended to respond to the school principal's needs and his or her perceptions of the counselor's role. As noted in Chapter 1, through restructuring counselors now answer to an increased number of decision makers responsible for personnel decisions. If counselors don't distinguish themselves as providing programs that help youth remedy their academic, behavioral, and interpersonal difficulties, their positions may be in jeopardy. With these increased pressures for accountability, counselors need an approach that leads to rapid, observable change in students.

Overview of the Contents

The book is based on the work of deShazer (1985), who developed the SFBC approach. He discovered that by focusing on solutions rather than problems, clients were getting better faster than with traditional counseling modalities. Implicit in the model is the belief that clients are not always overcome by their problems. In fact, solutions are actually present even though they may be unrecognized. By rediscovering their resources, clients are encouraged to repeat past successes. As simple as this sounds, it represents a powerful, empowering dynamic that enables clients to quickly resolve the difficulties that brought them to counseling.

Chapter 1 presents the background and rationale for SFBC and its special relevance to school counseling. A solution-focused miniexperience guides readers to explore the process personally in terms of their experience as school counselors.

Chapter 2 demonstrates how to prepare students for solution-based counseling and how to facilitate the initial goal-setting phase of the model. Step-by-step procedures prepare the reader to help students behaviorally identify what they will be doing to achieve their goals. In the section on the "miracle question," the reader learns how to help students explore their goals by painting a mental picture of what their lives would look like if they were problem free.

Chapter 3 describes how the reader can equip students to see instances of unrecognized success and exceptions to their difficulties. The reader learns how to encourage through "cheerleading" that reinforces even slightly successful steps students have used to better their situations. This chapter also covers scaling techniques students can use to assess their current status as well as progress toward their goals. The chapter concludes with detailed instructions for constructing a message—composed of compliments, a bridging statement, and tasks—that students receive at the end of each interview. A practice exercise gives readers a chance to apply these steps in addressing a personal situation.

Chapter 4 provides a transcript of one of my actual student cases so that readers can see the entire process unfold as described in Chapters 2 and 3. The case includes prompts and a message to help the reader associate process and practice.

Chapter 5 covers the interventions counselors employ in second and subsequent interviews with students. These interventions address the successes students have experienced since their previous meeting. The chapter also discusses the scaling interventions used during subsequent sessions to determine students' progress.

Chapter 6 describes additional applications of the solution-focused approach. Readers learn how to use referral forms that help referring persons specify, behaviorally, what they expect from students as a result of counseling as well as instances of success already experienced by the students. The chapter presents detailed examples of how to implement the solution-focused approach with small groups and entire classes.

Acknowledgments

Although my name appears on the cover, the completion of this book would not have been possible without the excellent training I have received in SFBC from John Walter. I cannot express enough gratitude for the significant contributions of Anne Domeck, who spent endless hours editing the pages and chapters of the manuscript to be concise and clear. Mona Cattan Lewis's interest in SFBC and dedication in transcribing case studies from videos was greatly appreciated. To the many participants of the workshops I have conducted, I am thankful for your enthusiasm and willingness to learn something new, especially Margaret Cavett and Jed Turner, whose creative applications of solution-focused counseling to groups have been included in this book.

I am also thankful to the many students I have counseled using this approach whose stories fill these pages with hope. They have made me a better counselor and educator, and my life has been inspired by their successes.

I am indebted most of all to my wife, Libby, and my children, Seth, Courtney, and Bradley, whose cooperation and understanding made this book possible. Thanks for your patience and support.

About the Author

Gerald B. Sklare, NCC (Nationally Certified Counselor), is Professor in the Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology at the University of Louisville in Kentucky. Both his master's and doctor's degrees are in counselor education from Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. He has served as a teacher and/or counselor in elementary, junior high, and high schools; he conducts workshops around the United States on Solution-Focused Brief Counseling; and he currently practices in schools and privately using this approach.

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Counseling in Schools

PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Picture yourself right out of graduate school with a degree in school counseling eager to demonstrate your effectiveness counseling kids at a school that has just hired you as their school counselor. You have wanted to be a school counselor for as long as you can remember. A year passes and the picture has dimmed. You have become overwhelmed with your assigned responsibilities and find little time to counsel kids. When you make the time to counsel students, you find yourself feeling discouraged because you only have the time to give students a few sessions, and this leaves you thinking, "What can I accomplish in a few sessions, so why bother?" Because your main motivation in becoming a school counselor was to counsel students, you become disillusioned and question your decision to enter the field.

Then, a flicker of hope appears with the development of a new counseling model that seems ideally suited for schools. This recent approach, called solution-focused brief counseling (SFBC), shows promise because it focuses on students' assets rather than their deficits, and only a few meetings are needed to help students get on track to resolving their issues. Because many of the steps in the SFBC process resemble techniques learned in other approaches, the model is relatively easy for you to master.

As you use this new approach to change the focus of counseling from problems to solutions, you begin to notice a change in the students you counsel. They seem more confident as they begin to recognize their strengths and resources that were previously unnoticed. You observe your students repeating their successes, which in turn beget other successes. Your sessions have a positive focus, leaving you and your students feeling upbeat. And because the students were doing all of the work in your counseling meetings, you are going home after work energized and full of hope.

This sounds too good to be true; however, practicing SFBC in schools can help counselors deliver the kind of assistance that drew them to the profession, and it does brighten counselors' outlooks. As one elementary school counselor described, she no longer goes home depressed, thinking of all the unpleasant conditions her students face. Instead, she focuses on solutions and achieving goals. She noted that "I find myself more helpful to children more of the time and that makes me feel great knowing I'm doing what my title describes." (M. Cavitt, personal communication, February 15, 1996).

But why are so many school counselors feeling they can't deliver the help they were trained to give? Practicing school counselors commonly cite the lack of training in counseling strategies that can be applied given the realities of a school setting. Counselor education programs typically emphasize theoretical models of counseling that require longer-term therapy than school counselors have time to offer or that school districts want for their students. School counselors do not have the time or the training to provide such therapy. Long-term therapy implies in-depth assistance, which is beyond the scope of the school counselor's work. Although it is important for counselors to understand the theoretical underpinnings of psycho-

analytic, psychodynamic, gestalt, behavior, transactional analysis, rational emotive behavioral therapy, Adlerian, and person-centered counseling, expecting school counselors to apply these models in a school setting is unrealistic.

Moreover, most counseling approaches used in counselor education programs focus on problems, thus implying that something is wrong with the client. This emphasis on deficits usually leads to extensive and time-consuming exploration of problems, etiology, histories, and causes.

The media also contribute to the concept that those needing counseling have deficits and have failed in some aspect of their lives (Downing & Harrison, 1992). Television and newspaper ads that promote counseling accentuate people's inability to cope with everyday issues. Students exposed to these descriptions may see themselves as dysfunctional and believe that seeking help would further emphasize their negative attributes. With this perspective, students' reluctance about talking to counselors who stress their faults is understandable.

As a general rule, students who do see counselors are often referred by school personnel and parents. Rather than being "customers" of counseling, they come as visitors usually honoring either a request or an ultimatum and, therefore, do not commit themselves to the process. The real customers are the parents, teachers, administrators, or other adults who want the student changed. They own the problem. Counselors also can inadvertently be transformed into customers if they become more interested in change than do the children they serve (Kral, 1994). Youth who are referred to counselors may view counseling as really serving those who sent them, which results in resistance.

The difficulties of providing effective counseling are compounded by the expectations that immediate observable changes will occur. The managed-care trend reflects what is now demanded in the mental health arena. Counseling is to be effective and quick because mental health providers are required to limit the number of sessions for which they will be paid. Overburdened teachers, like managed-care providers, are frustrated with their students' behavior, academic problems, or both. They send youth to the counselor for a quick fix

as if she or he had a magic wand. Failure to rehabilitate an individual instantly can result in teachers losing confidence in counselors and the counseling process.

The more counselors are seen as failing to furnish essential counseling services and programs, the more school communities question their value in schools. In the past, the school principal's needs and perceptions of the counselor's role influenced practices. Now, as a result of recent national trends to restructure schools, teachers and parents have a greater say in staffing local schools. Counselors now answer to an increasing number of decision makers responsible for personnel assignments. If counselors don't distinguish themselves as providing programs and services that help youth remedy their academic, behavioral, and interpersonal difficulties, their positions may be in jeopardy. This has already begun. Some school districts have contracted privately with psychologists, social workers, and local mental health agencies to provide counseling to students—counseling that was previously rendered by school counselors. Unless we respond to these changes, we will be relegated to being glorified clerks.

A New Solution

Fortunately, school counselors now have an innovative counseling approach that provides a solution to this predicament. Through the work of a number of innovative practitioners (Berg & Miller, 1992; deShazer, 1985; O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989; Walter & Peller, 1992), a new model of counseling has emerged that can have tremendous impact in school settings. Recently, this potential has been recognized in a number of articles that have appeared (Bonnington, 1993; Bruce, 1995; Downing & Harrison, 1992; LaFountain, Garner, & Eliason, 1996; Littrell et al., 1992; Murphy, 1994).

In his early work with this approach to counseling, deShazer began to ask clients to notice what was better in their lives between sessions (deShazer & Molar, 1964). Attention to problems that brought clients into counseling was not part of the assignment. It is remarkable that two thirds of his clients reported that things were better by

their next session. Among the one third who did not indicate that things were better, half of these clients began to discover improvements that had first gone unnoticed.

It is interesting that many of the things that clients reported were better had nothing to do with the problem that had brought them into counseling in the first place. This was significant—solutions were occurring but often went unrecognized unless attention was redirected to highlight these successes. It also reflected a shift in emphasis from the traditional problem focus to a solution focus, where exploring the problem was minimized. For example, depressed clients are not always depressed, for there are times when depression is absent. Likewise, clients could identify times when the problems that brought them into counseling were absent.

Weiner-Davis, deShazer, and Gingerich (1987) concluded that perhaps positive change could take place even before the first counseling meeting. They began to ask those who called for appointments to notice between now and the time they came in for their first appointment what was better in their lives. Amazingly, they reported the same results that deShazer found with tasks assigned for clients to accomplish between sessions. Clients concluded that perhaps the problems had been overemphasized. This finding led deShazer and his colleagues to conclude that focusing on solutions rather than problems would be far more effective, a major philosophical shift in the counseling field.

The movement to a solution focus removed the need for in-depth exploration of the historical antecedents of clients' problems. Taking the investigation of the causes and origins of problems out of the process dramatically shortens the time needed for counseling. When the focus is on solutions, counseling becomes brief. Moreover, as the focus changed to solutions, actions became of primary importance and insight was deemphasized. These outcomes make SFBC an effective model for working with children. Because insight is not necessary, this approach offers a good fit, for at some levels, youth do not have the cognitive skills essential to understand where they are and how they got there in the same way adults are able to grasp these concepts (Kral, 1994). Although identified as therapy by its founders, this approach is more appropriately considered counseling

rather than therapy for several reasons (Littrell et al., 1992): The approach is relatively easy to master, it emphasizes problem solving and student-produced solutions, and assistance is provided in a school setting.

Solution-focused counselors found that by using their clients' words, counseling became easier for clients to comprehend. By using students' language, counseling was actually personalized to meet their needs. Students' abilities to communicate at a familiar level and recognize that they are understood creates an ideal situation.

Another aspect of this method suits children well—the focus on using language that directs them to take positive actions. Children arrive at counselors' doors most often because either they or the person referring them wants them to *stop* doing something (fighting, disrupting, talking, playing). Such negative goals are very difficult to accomplish because, to imagine themselves not doing something, they must replace those thoughts with something concrete. Developmentally, children need examples of what they are to *start* doing. The solution focus presents children with what they can do.

This approach also advocates clients determining their outcome goals for counseling. Counseling focuses on clients' desires, not on the desires of the counselor. Clients are viewed as being their own expert—they know what is best for them. Having faith in clients' ability to identify their goals conveys confidence and respect, and when children are permitted to determine their own agenda for counseling, resistance diminishes. Giving up the role of the expert who knows what's best for clients may be difficult for counselors. Counselors' effectiveness in using this method depends on their abilities to embrace this belief, to allow clients to do all the work and assume all the responsibility, and to recognize that regardless of clients' past experiences or background, change for the better is possible.

Many of the skills associated with SFBC are shared with other counseling models in the field. Listening, responding with empathy, asking open-ended questions, supporting, reinforcing, identifying goals, and applying scaling methods are but a few of the techniques solution-focused brief counselors have in common with other mental health applications. Therefore, the transition to a solution-based

approach becomes easier than you might imagine to adapt to your own style of practice.

As with any counseling model, this approach may not be effective with all students. Some may not want to be "fixed"— because they may just want someone to listen to them. Students who have recently experienced a loss may not yet be ready to find solutions. Others may be cautious about your new approach and reject your assistance. Making students aware of your rationale for using this different approach with them may help alleviate their suspicion.

Keep in mind, SFBC is just another approach school counselors can use in addition to others found to be effective with students.

To personalize some of the concepts alluded to thus far, consider the following six questions:

1. If a miracle happened during the night while you were sleeping and the next day the problem of not having the time to counsel was solved, what would you notice would be different?
2. What would you be doing that you weren't doing before?
3. Who else would see this difference, and what would they report?
4. When have some parts of this miracle already occurred and what is different about these times?
5. On a scale of 0 to 10 with 0 being 100% unsatisfied with your opportunity to counsel students and 10 representing the day after the miracle occurred and 100% satisfaction with the counseling you are providing, where would you place yourself on that scale now?
6. What will you have to do to move up the scale just 10%? How will you do it?

These are the kinds of questions solution-focused counselors ask their clients. Answering these questions is the first step in personally beginning to comprehend the SFBC process. The central philosophy of SFBC provides the framework for the assumptions and concepts that guide this approach. What follows is a review of this philosophy, the assumptions, and the guiding concepts.

Central Philosophy

As with any counseling model, there are rules of thumb that reflect the core beliefs and lead to the most effective use for the model. DeShazer (1987, p. 59) and Berg and Miller (1992, p. 17) have proposed three basic rules for counselors using SFBC.

The first rule is the old saying, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Making an issue out of something that is not an issue for clients can cause difficulties in areas that were previously manageable to them. Counselors should focus on generating solutions, not additional concerns. Clients need to work on what they see as causing them difficulties; otherwise, the counselor's agenda becomes the focus of counseling. Following this rule means that counselors subscribe to the philosophy that clients determine their goals for counseling—not the counselor.

Rule two is, "Once you know what works, do more of it." Recognizing those interventions that clients report as successful gives the counselor valuable information. Once successes are identified, counselors have clients replicate them. The temptation to become more elegant or try something different to move more quickly should be avoided. Duplicating an assignment that has previously worked has an excellent chance of succeeding again.

In the big picture, clients tend to miss things that are working for them. They tend to direct attention instead to what is wrong and not working. Problems grow disproportionately in relation to the solutions that generally go unnoticed. People tend to describe problems as always happening or goals as never being attained. These absolutes are not true 100% of the time. Students aren't always tardy for class, always disturbing the teacher, or never doing homework. There are instances when they are on time, are cooperating with the teacher, or are taking responsibility for doing their homework. These moments of success are frequently forgotten or generally unrecognized. Therefore, it is important for counselors to pay particular attention to indications of what works for each and every client so that these solutions can be replicated. In adhering to this rule, counselors commit to the belief that all people have been successful in overcoming their problems at various times in their lives. They have the ability to succeed again.

The third rule states, "If it doesn't work, don't do it again. Do something different." The American work ethic promotes the concept that "If at first you don't succeed, try, try, and try again." When trying again, it is important to use different strategies to yield different results. In counseling, however, when confronted with difficulties, clients tend to use the same familiar coping strategies because that is all they already know how to do. Walter and Peller (1992) report a common example of this phenomenon, wherein people repeat ineffective strategies over and over. People often misplace an item such as a wallet or a set of keys. On searching for the item and not finding it on the kitchen table, they check the dresser in the bedroom unsuccessfully, followed by the counter in the bathroom, and then back to the kitchen table once again. If the item was not on the table before, why would it be there now? Repeating something that didn't work doesn't make sense. Continued exploration in new locations is a more logical choice. Subscribing to this third rule helps counselors reformulate their ideas about resistance because when clients demonstrate reluctance or appear uncooperative, they actually are telling counselors what does not work for them.

Solution-Focused Assumptions

The basic philosophy of any counseling approach carries with it basic assumptions counselors need to internalize for the model to work. Adhering to these assumptions keeps the counselor on track. Various solution-focused practitioners articulate in their own way the assumptions inherent in the solution-focused approach. Walter and Peller (1992) are to be credited with the basics of the assumptions that follow.

The first assumption contends that when we concentrate on successes, beneficial changes will take place. The focus needs to be directed toward what is right and working for clients as opposed to what's wrong and troublesome. Practicing "solution talk" rather than "problem talk" facilitates the process. This is a rather difficult assignment for novice solution-focused counselors because most mental health providers have been conditioned to look for problems.

Shifting from problem to solution identification requires conscious effort and repeated practice.

Even 20 years ago, this concept was exemplified in the forward-thinking work of Hosford, Moss, and Morrell (1976) with stuttering inmates. After recording conversations with prisoners, a second recording was made from the original with all stuttering edited out. The convicts listened to the edited recording that featured their talking without any trace of stuttering. Stuttering was significantly reduced as a result of focusing on the positive and the solution rather than the problem. The same solution approach was implemented with a university basketball player to improve his free-throw shooting. An edited video that demonstrated his shooting free throws with perfect form and accuracy was prepared. Prior to games and practice, he watched the tape, then closed his eyes and imagined himself shooting with perfect form. His habit of only focusing on the solution—an accurate shot— resulted in his missing only one free throw for the entire season!

The second assumption asserts that every problem has identifiable exceptions that can be found and transformed into solutions. Clients are inclined to view their problems as always happening, when in reality, their problems fade away at times. Clients become so immersed with their issues that they often fail to see the instances when the problem isn't present. Clients fail to recognize the significance of these exceptions. It is up to counselors to listen carefully for hints that signal where, when, and how exceptions occur as a step in helping clients develop solutions.

Jean, a seventh-grade girl, requested help because she and her older sister, a junior in high school, didn't communicate often, and when they did, they constantly argued about who was right and who was wrong. Then, each tried to prove the other wrong with a report to their father. Jean desired to end this conflict.

After the counselor inquired about when their relationship was somewhat better, Jean recalled an incident 2 months earlier in which they both shared with each other about what was going on in their lives, and for a few days afterward, they didn't argue or report to their dad. Jean recalled that her sister even "took up for her" on one occasion. Although the exception was hard to find initially, with

some probing, it was rediscovered. Jean was assigned the task of doing more of what worked. In the second meeting a week later, Jean reported that she had been talking with her sister and had stopped telling on her, and her sister had responded similarly. They started to become allies and to do some things together. Jean's father remarked to Jean and her sister that he had noticed fewer quarrels and that he was happier seeing this. This was apparent to Jean as she noted that he began to smile more when he came home. The identifiable solutions were there all the time, hidden in the exceptions to Jean's problem. All it took to get Jean on track toward a healthier relationship with her sister was three meetings of teamwork between Jean and her counselor.

The third assumption is that small changes have a ripple effect that expand into larger changes. Once people get to know one another, they become somewhat predictable and come to anticipate each other's behaviors. When clients alter their behaviors ever so slightly, it causes a chain reaction in response to the initial change. Those affected by the change find themselves adjusting their responses, which in turn elicits further changes in clients. As in Jean's situation, when she became supportive of her sister, her sister became supportive of her. They began to do things with one another. The changes between the sisters also had an observable, positive effect on their father.

The fourth assumption recognizes that all clients have what it takes to resolve their difficulties. By highlighting clients' strengths and how these strengths are initiated rather than focusing on deficits, changes occur more rapidly. Counselors and clients together face the task of fully exposing moments of success and, perhaps most important, identifying what clients have done to make these moments happen. Exploring clients' road maps to success steers them to an empowering adventure.

After 3 weeks of using SFBC with at-risk middle school students, the school secretary reported that she had asked these students the same two questions. The first was, "Do you want to come back and see the counselor again?" They enthusiastically responded, "Yes, I would like to do that." And the follow-up question was, "Do you think he (the counselor) wants to see you?" They emphatically responded, "He sure does!" These students had gained confidence by

recognizing they were capable of being successful and were ready to demonstrate they could do it again. Students seemed pleasantly surprised that a counselor would talk to them about what they were doing right, when their past experiences with counselors were generally negative because their discussions focused on what they were doing wrong. Friends of some of the students who had been counseled requested counseling for themselves and made comments like, "Bridget isn't getting in trouble anymore, so I want you to fix me up like you did her." Accenting children's previously unrecognized resources challenges them to prove their competency.

The fifth assumption concludes that clients' goals are viewed in positive terms, reflecting what clients want to do, rather than in negative terms, reflecting the absence of something they don't want to do. It is unlikely that clients can picture something not happening. To do this, clients must envision something else occurring in its place. For example, try to imagine yourself not arguing with your parents. You will either see yourself arguing with them or see yourself doing something instead of arguing. Constructing a goal of *not* doing something is unproductive because it cannot measured. As clients relate their goals in negative terms, recounting what they don't want, counselors are charged with helping clients identify positively worded goals that reflect what they do want to happen. Clients are empowered as they envision themselves accomplishing a measurable goal.

Additional Guiding Concepts

In addition to the foregoing assumptions, several supplemental concepts provide a road map for implementing this model.

Concept 1: Avoid Problem Analysis

Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once said, "It's a mistake to look for an explanation when all you need is a description of how things

work" (source unknown). SFBC addresses what is working for children instead of exploring the etiology of their problems.

Rudy, a sixth-grade boy, was referred to me because he could not control his temper, which resulted in his cursing and fighting in school and in the trailer court where he lived. Because of his outbursts, his mother and stepfather were being threatened with eviction. Rather than embarking on in-depth exploration of the causes of his temper, cursing, and fighting, we focused on when this wasn't a problem for him. This emphasis reinforced Rudy's ability to control himself.

Concept 2: Be Efficient With Your Interventions

One goal is to get clients in and out of counseling as quickly as possible. Typically, therapists spend much time trying to discover the source and cause of problems; in contrast, the solution-based counselors go for solutions that work. Counselors must avoid making clients dependent on them for long-term answers when all they may need is a nudge to start them on their path toward their own solutions. With time constraints often dictating school counselors' agendas, getting the most accomplished in a minimum number of interventions is essential.

A 13-year-old middle school boy we shall call Derek saw a friend shoot himself in the head with a 22-caliber pistol. Four days after the incident, he requested counseling. With just a few interventions, Derek began to recognize solutions he already was doing occasionally. When he felt he needed to express his feelings about the incident, he was able to initiate a conversation with the victim and his mother. He also recognized that sometimes he needed to be physical, so he played basketball to relieve his tension. One meeting with Derek to identify the solutions that he already had started to construct was all it took to relieve his troubles.

Concept 3: Focus on the Present and Future

When counselors help clients identify what will have to happen in their world to tell them they no longer need counseling, it conveys

the presupposition that things will be better in the future. Having clients paint this picture of how their present and future will look when they are successful and devoid of their problems sends a clear message that counselors believe in their clients' abilities to overcome their adversities. This also suggests to clients that counselors are concerned with their present and future adjustments. Past events are only emphasized in the process of finding exceptions to problems. In contrast, most conventional therapeutic approaches expect clients to investigate and understand the past as a precursor to changing their behavior. This can be so overwhelming to many clients that they use the past as a scapegoat to inhibit personal growth. Solution-focused counselors find that once clients begin to see themselves doing the desired behaviors, their perception of the past changes, and exploring the past becomes unnecessary. Getting clients to take action first shows them that they are able to succeed regardless of previous obstacles.

James, an eighth-grade boy, was sent to me because of his low self-esteem. He had fallen off a bike when he was 8 years old and nearly died from the resulting head injury. He took longer than others his age to formulate responses to my questions. He spoke in a slow and deliberate manner, often saying that the questions I asked were hard to answer. However, given enough time, he was able to process information quite well. He was failing most of his classes, except for several D's. His goal for counseling was to stop feeling dumb and feel smart sometimes. Focusing on the present, we searched for occasions when he felt a little less dumb or even a little smart. Additional interventions helped James identify what he was doing for himself to enable that to happen. He identified that he had been more successful and felt more OK about himself when he blocked out distractions in class so he could focus on what the teacher was saying, when he went to the library after school to do his homework instead of going home, and when he asked to be tutored during the last period of the day. James did improve several of his grades to D's and C's, and he even scored 100% on a science test for the first time. These improvements helped him feel smarter.

Concept 4: Focus on Actions Rather Than Insights

Children's levels of cognitive development limit their ability to comprehend insights about their problems. Insight development also requires a time commitment that students and counselors do not have. Furthermore, Metcalf (1995) points out that, "knowing why we are the way we are doesn't offer solutions. As students discover why they are sad, angry or shy, they often use the information as a symptom and reason for not succeeding" (p. 19). As a result of Freud's influence, the psychological community has espoused the belief that clients need to know why they got to be the way they are and that this insight is required for change. Yalom (1995) argues against this position because he has found that insight is not necessary for change to occur.

I worked with a 12-year-old female, Tiffany, who was referred because she repeatedly fought with other students and argued and swore at her grandmother and her teachers. She was on the verge of being removed from the honors program and placed in a class for students with behavior disorders. Because her mother didn't want Tiffany, her grandmother was raising her. Many non-solution-focused counselors would have pursued insights surrounding her hostile behavior as it might relate to her mother's rejection. However, because Tiffany's goal was to get along better with classmates, teachers, and her grandmother, counseling targeted what she was doing (her actions) during the times when she was able to control her temper and get along even a little better with them. By our third meeting, she had improved so much that she was no longer being considered for the behavior disorder class and was asked to tutor some of the children with behavior disorders at a neighboring elementary school once a week. She was so effective that the elementary school BD teacher requested that Tiffany come to the school every day. Moreover, her grandmother was reported to have commented that, "I like my new Tiffany better." Although Tiffany still had her ups and downs, her behavior and relationships improved significantly.

Summary

SFBC has been shown to be an effective and efficient counseling approach that will enable school counselors to provide actual counseling to their students. By focusing on solutions rather than problems, counseling becomes brief. The emphasis on students' strengths and resources stimulates students' confidence.

Practice Exercise

The following exercise will help you see the impact on clients when the interview shifts from a problem to a solution focus.

- Think of a recent problem that is causing you some difficulty.
- Answer the following questions about this problem:
  - When did this problem begin?
  - What seems to be the cause of this problem?
  - How often does this problem occur?
  - What keeps this problem going?
  - What do you do to overcome this problem?
- Note the effect these problem-focused questions have on you.
  - Are you left with a sense of direction about how to overcome your issue?
  - Do your answers to these questions help you come to a resolution of this problem?
  - As you think about what you have just experienced, are you left with feelings of hope or hopelessness?
  - Do your answers leave you feeling empowered?
- Using the same problem, answer the following questions:
  - When do you not experience this problem?
  - What's different about the times when you don't have this problem?
  - How do you explain that this problem doesn't happen then?
  - How do you keep this from being a problem then?
- Note the effect these solution-focused questions have on you.

Are you left with a sense of direction about how to overcome your issue?

Do your answers to these questions help you come to a resolution of this problem?

As you think about what you have just experienced, are you left with feelings of hope or hopelessness?

Do your answers leave you feeling empowered?

- Notice the different reactions you experience when answering problem-oriented versus solution-oriented questions.

  Which ones seem to be more helpful to you?

  Which ones help you to be more responsible?

  Which ones might lead to enhancing your self-esteem?

- Your answers most likely would have led you to conclude that solution-focused questions were more productive for you and would be of more benefit to your students as well.

2

Setting Goals

To be efficient and effective with SFBC, counselors need to establish well-developed goals with students. Identification of goals in the first interview—regardless of one's theoretical orientation—is the best predictor of effective counseling outcomes. Furthermore, the more concrete and behaviorally specific the goals, the quicker clients improve. Goals also must be stated in terms of the small steps of observable actions students will start—not in terms of what they will not do or what they will stop. The solution-focused approach also calls for creating hypothetical goals that include the desired behaviors as a way to help clients see what is possible for them.

Opening the First Meeting: Explaining the Process

As in any form of counseling, before beginning the first session with students, you first explain the procedures. This prepares students for the difficult questions you will ask, the note taking, and the break that will occur when you write a message for the client, which will be explained later. Clients learn the ways this form of brief counseling differs from other approaches they may have experienced or what they may have anticipated.

After a brief exchange of introductions and usual greetings, the procedures are introduced something like this:

> I want to let you know how this is going to work. I am going to ask you a lot of questions, and some of them are going to sound kind of crazy and will be tough to answer. Some of the answers you give I'm going to write down on my notepad. I'm going to use these notes to write you a message. At the end of our meeting, I will leave the room for a few minutes to review the notes and take some time to put my thoughts together about what we have talked about so I can write this message. When I return, I will tell you what I was thinking about and read the message to you. We will make a copy of the message so you can take one with you and I can keep one. What do you think about this?

This explanation introduces the process, acquaints students with procedures, and also prepares them for how hard they will have to work to answer difficult questions. When students get stuck, counselors can refer to this introduction by saying, "Remember what I said when we began about how hard it will be to answer some of these questions? Well, this is one of those questions." The last thing counselors want is for students to feel "dumb" because they are having difficulty answering questions. Interventions can be used to keep this from happening and, at the same time, build a supportive relationship.

Walters and Peller (1992) have suggested that counseling sessions begin with a question that initiates goal-oriented thinking soon after clients sit down. After exchanging greetings, they recommend asking, "What's your goal for coming here?" For some students, this works well because they can easily identify specific goals they would like to achieve in counseling. However, with other students, a brief social exchange is needed to break the ice before counseling can begin. And still others may wish to complain before getting down to business. When this occurs, it's best to let them "unload" for a brief time. Counselors should acknowledge students' concerns by listening, reflecting empathetically, nodding, and making comments that demonstrate support for their coming to counseling.

To initiate the identification of goals, counselors typically ask, "What's the reason you have come to see me?" Or, "What will have to happen as a result of your coming here that will tell you that you no longer need to see me?" Or they may say, "How will you know when counseling is no longer necessary?" These questions elicit statements that can be developed into concrete behavioral goals.

Developing a Goal: Using Outcome Questions That Detail Solutions in Positive Terms

When students are asked about their goals for counseling, they respond in one of three ways. Students' goal statements can be classified as (a) positive goals, (b) negative goals, (c) harmful goals, or (d) "I don't know" goals.

Positive Goals

Positive goals state behaviors that can be observed and measured. Students who respond with positive goals may say, "I want to raise my grades, and I want you to help me to figure out how to do that." Or they may say, "I would like to learn how to get along better with the other kids." Or they may state, "I want to be able to get my teacher off my back so I don't have to come back to this stupid place again." These replies are general goals stated in terms of what clients want

to accomplish and therefore can be defined as positive goals. Positive goals also are measurable, so that clients can recognize when their objectives have been attained.

However necessary, most positive goals lack the concrete, specific behavioral details that can indicate when students are on track for reaching them. Eliciting descriptions of specific things students will be doing when they are moving in the right direction gives them the details needed to paint mental pictures of their solutions.

Consider the following questions to help students create their behaviorally specific goal pictures:

- "What do you think you would be doing that would tell you your grades were on the rise?" Or, "So as your grades are on the rise, what would you be doing that would have caused that to happen?"
- "What would the other kids in your class say you were doing that would show them that you're getting along better with them?" Or, "If you were getting along better with the other kids, what would you notice that you were doing to make it so?"
- "Tell me what you would be doing that would convince you that you're able to express your feelings to your parents." Or, "When your parents observe you expressing your feelings to them, what would they say you would be doing that you're not doing yet?"

As indicated, the tenor of counselors' questions implies that clients will accomplish their goals. The questioning follows a pattern—the answer to the counselor's follow-up question provides the information needed to form the next question, which in turn solicits additional examples of what clients' goals look like to them and their significant others.

Negative Goals

Often, clients respond to counselors' inquiries with negative goals, which are goals expressed as the absence of something. Clients either want to avoid having something happen or they wish to stop some-

thing that has been happening. Negative goals are difficult, if not impossible, to attain. The critical perspective about negative goals involves realizing that for something to not happen, something else must take its place—therein lies the goal.

Unfortunately, negative goals are more commonly expressed than positive goals. Typically, they are expressed in two ways: (a) wanting themselves to stop doing something or (b) wanting others to stop doing something. Each form of negative goal must be addressed separately.

When clients want to stop doing something, the counselor asks them to identify the specific behaviors that will be substituted. Typical expressions of this kind of negative goal include, "I don't want to get bad grades," or "I don't want to lose my temper," or "I want to stop being late to class." Counselors reframe "absence of something" (negative) expressions into "presence of something" (positive) goals. When students express this type of negative goal, counselors should immediately intervene with questions that solicit observable behavioral replacements. To redirect a negative goal into a positive one, counselors use terms such as "instead of," "if you weren't . . . then what would you . . . ," "be doing differently," "in place of," "rather than," "start doing."

Counselor Interventions to Help Reframe Negative Goals

More specifically, consider the following brief exchanges that redirect negative goals into positive ones (C = Counselor; S = Student):

Example 1

C: If you weren't getting bad grades, then what would you be doing?

S: I would be getting better grades. *(Positive goal)*

C: So your goal is to get better grades. What grades would you have to earn that would tell you that your grades are better? *(Specifics of goal)*

Example 2

C: So instead of losing your temper, what would you be doing?

S: I would stay calm. *(Positive goal)*

C: Remaining calm is what you want. And what would you be doing that would tell you that you are calm? *(Detailing the specifics of goal)*

Example 3

C: So what would you be doing rather than being late to class?

S: I would go to class on time. *(Positive goal)*

C: Therefore, making sure you're in your classroom on time is your goal. What would you start doing that would indicate you were on the right track to getting to class on time? *(Detailing the specifics of starting a goal)*

As shown, the follow-up interventions enabled clients to provide more details about what their goals looked like. The more behaviorally specific the goal, the better the chance clients can assess their successes.

More often than not, students express negative goals that call for others to be different or to stop doing certain things. This form of goal implies that others will need to change for clients to be happy and that counselors can help make that happen. It also implies that others must be the first to initiate change.

When students express goals that reflect a desire for others to stop something or not do something, counselors must help clients reframe their goals into positively stated goals that give the client the responsibility. Common examples of this pattern of negative goal statements are, "I don't want my parents to interfere with my choice of friends." Or, "I don't want to be ignored when I have something to say in class." These rebuttals can be effective: "How can I help you with this?" "How is this a problem for you?" "What difference does that make to you?" "That seems real important to you. What's the reason for that?" "If they did change, what would that do for you?"

Clients begin to recognize their responsibilities when the goal is shifted to the positive.

Counselor Interventions When Clients Want Others to Change

The following types of interventions are effective when clients' proposed goals focus on changing the behavior of another person.

Example 1

C: So, if your parents didn't interfere with your choice of friends, what would that do for you?

S: Then I would be more comfortable talking to my parents about the things that I'm doing.

C: So, becoming comfortable talking to your parents about what's going on with you is what you would like to happen? *(Positive goal)*

S: Yeah, I'd like that because we used to talk all the time.

C: So, what would you be doing that would tell you that you *are* becoming a little more comfortable talking to them? *(Detailing specifics of goal)*

Example 2

C: What can I do to help you with this problem (being ignored in class)?

S: Maybe you can tell my teacher how I'm feeling ignored when I want to contribute.

C: So, you would like her to know that you want to be more involved in class and you're looking for ways to make her aware of this. *(Positive goal)*

S: Yes. I would tell her, but I'm uncomfortable.

C: You're saying that if you were more comfortable, you would let her know on your own, and I'm wondering what would

> you being doing that would tell you that you are just a little more comfortable. *(Detailing specifics of goal)*

Determining the client's motivation for wanting others to stop or not do something enables counselors to identify the underlying positive goal for counseling.

Harmful Goals

When first beginning to use SFBC with students, you may encounter situations that throw you off track. Often when this occurs, you will switch to what you know best and what you are already used to. Being prepared for impediments that may surface in an interview helps you to avoid abandoning the solution-focused model.

The solution-focused approach emphasizes that the goals for counseling must be the students'—not the counselors'. On rare occasions, students present goals that, if fulfilled, would violate the law, be harmful to them, or not be in their best interests. Examples include underaged students dropping out of school, wanting to have babies, becoming prostitutes, hurting someone, damaging property, running away from home, and so forth. Obviously, ethical counselors do not support harmful goals.

Counselors should recognize that students' destructive goals are really symptoms of underlying or root goals that reflect students' needs to fill voids in their lives. Using a series of solution-finding questions that identify the reasons for their goals, counselors help students reframe and identify healthy goals that will meet their underlying needs. Addressing harmful goals is similar to working with impossible goals.

The following example illustrate how to modify destructive goals into productive goals.

C: What's your goal?

S: I don't want to go to school anymore.

C: What's the reason you don't want to go to school anymore?

S: Because I'm flunking all my classes, and I've just given up trying.

C: So, are you also saying that if you were trying harder and were doing better in school, you would be more satisfied?

S: Probably so.

C: Could a goal for you be to figure out a way to try harder and do better in school?

S: Yes, I would like that.

This example demonstrates how counselors, by paying careful attention to the clues students divulge, can use this information to redirect an unproductive goal into a productive one.

"I Don't Know" Goals

Students often are referred to counselors by parents, teachers, administrators, and other invested adults. The real customers for change are those who referred the student to you. Unfortunately, the customers don't seek counseling for themselves but want you to change the student who most often is a noncommitted visitor. When visitors are asked about their goals for counseling, "I don't know" responses are common. On hearing this response, many counselors become stuck. The use of hypothetical *if* questions frequently helps visitors initiate goal development. The examples in Table 2.1 demonstrate this technique.

Inserting a hypothetical *if* removes the pressure of having to know the correct answer. When the hypothetical approach is used, most students are willing to identify the reason for being sent to a counselor. In some cases, persistent repetition of *if* questions may be needed to ascertain the reasons the client is in the counselor's office.

Helping Involuntary Clients Become Customers in the Process

Even after students identify why someone other than themselves wants them to receive help, they may not seem to be interested in counseling. However, asking questions focused on what they will get

TABLE 2.1 Questions to Help Students Set Goals

Goal Question	*Student Response*	*Counselor Response*
What's your goal?	I don't know.	*If* you did know, . . .
What's the reason you're here?	I have no idea.	*If* you did have an idea, . . .
Who do you think sent you?	I can't figure it out.	*If* you could figure it out, . . .
What's the reason someone wants you to be here?	Beats me.	*If* you could guess, . . .
What would your mom say you would be doing that would tell her you don't need to see me anymore?	It's beyond me.	*If* it weren't beyond you, . . .

out of the experience turns many visitors into customers. When clients recognize that counseling may get the referring party "off their backs" or that grounding will cease, they generally become more receptive to establishing goals. Interventions that help students become more receptive include these: "Is what they want for you something you want as well—especially knowing that the hassles between the two of you would end?" "Would it be in your best interest to want these changes for yourself?" "If this happened even a little bit, what would it do for you and what effect would it have on you and . . . ?"

Case Study: Dealing With a Reluctant Client

The following case demonstrates how the counselor's persistence and patience eventually resulted in identification of positive goals. Mike, an 11-year-old sixth grader, was recently transferred from a small rural elementary school to a metropolitan middle school of more than 1,500 students. He was referred to the counselor but did not seem to know why and therefore had no goals for counseling (C = Counselor; M = Mike).

C: As a result of your coming here, what is going to be going on with you that will tell you that you don't need to come here anymore?

M: I don't know. I don't even know how I got sent here. For all I know, my mom just signed me up.

C: So, you think your mom signed you up?

M: Uh huh (nods yes).

C: What do you think would be the reason she would sign you up to come down here to see me?

M: I don't know why she would (shakes head no).

C: If you had to decide what you wanted to come down to see me for, what would it be?

M: I don't know why I have to come down here (puts head on hand, withdraws more).

C: So, that's a puzzle to you about what's the reason you're here. So, your mom hasn't had a discussion with you about this by saying to you, "Mike, I want you to go see a school counselor because I think you need for some reason to go there."

M: All I know is she signed me up for Extra School Studies, and then somebody asked my mom if she wanted me to talk to somebody.

C: What would you need to do Extra School Studies for?

M: 'Cause I'm failing.

C: You think that could be one of the reasons they wanted you to come and see me, to help you do better in school and pass your classes?

M: They said it was too late in the year to pass.

C: Would you like to pass if there's any way to pass?

M: (Nods head strongly yes.)

C: What would have to happen for you to pass?

M: Do all my work.

C: Is that something you would be interested in doing?

M: (No response.)

C: Maybe you're not real sure, but you're thinking about it?

M: (No response; continues to look at floor.)

C: Well, what do you think? By being here and meeting with me, passing would be your ultimate goal?

M: (Nods head yes.)

C: Is that what you'd like to have happen? It doesn't look real promising right now, but at least that would be something you would like to do?

M: (Nods head yes.)

C: At least, if you can't pass, we could at least go over the steps so it won't happen again. Is that something you might think about or want to work on?

M: Yeah.

C: So, am I hearing that you would like to develop some better habits? You didn't say that, but that's what I was getting from what you said.

M: Yeah, that would be good.

Another effective approach is the "they're wrong, you're right" technique. By supporting students who claim the person who referred them for counseling is incorrect in their assessment, the counselor becomes the student's ally. This is demonstrated in the following case example with a sixth-grade girl who indicated she did not need or want to see me for counseling. When asked who referred her for counseling and why, she indicated that her father and assistant principal thought she wasn't able to control her temper. She attended weekly anger management classes against her will. She claimed that she didn't need the class or help from me because she was able to control her temper on her own. After a few minutes of complaining that her dad and the assistant principal were wrong in their assessment, I asked her, "So, you're saying that they are wrong and you are

right. What do you think if, through counseling, we could prove to them that they were wrong in sending you here and you were right all along. Would that be something that would interest you?" She responded, "That would be great." I then asked her, "What would they tell me you were doing that would show that they were wrong about your ability to control your temper and that you were right?" She then began to describe what turned into a goal for controlling her anger.

In the second session a week later, the student said the assistant principal had been amazed—when she lectured the student about breaking school rules, the student had listened quietly without swearing, which had been the student's typical response. The assistant principal was so impressed that she gave the student a 2-day rather than the usual 5-day suspension. Similar changes occurred in her classes and at home as she proved to everyone that they were wrong and she was right. Three sessions was all it took to get her on track in reducing her angry outbursts significantly.

Concrete behavioral goals are often not fully defined in the initial phase of goal identification. To expedite this, counselors help clients explore hypothetical solutions using a type of all-purpose strategy, referred to as the "miracle question."

The Miracle Question

The seeds of solutions have been planted during the initial contact with clients as school counselors engage in solution and goal talk rather than problem talk. Focusing on what life would look like if students were reaching their goals or were free of their problem helps highlight unnoticed successes. The miracle question magnifies and exposes minute glimpses of solutions not apparent when viewing the total puzzle. Fitting each piece of the puzzle together constructs a large picture in which exceptions can be found. The miracle question was discovered by deShazer (1990) in his frustration with a client's inability to formulate a well-defined, realistic, and achievable goal. It has since become a valuable tool for solution-focused counselors.

Typically, the miracle question is stated as follows:

> Suppose when you go to sleep tonight, a miracle occurs, and because you were sleeping, you didn't know it happened. The miracle solved the problem that brought you here. When you wake up in the morning, what clues will you see that lead you to discover that this miracle has taken place?

deShazer found that not only was his initial client able to come up with a well-defined goal in response to this question, but it worked with other clients as well. The miracle question was so effective in establishing well-defined goals that it has become part of the solution-focused brief therapy model.

This question has been found to work with most students, although its use is limited with younger children who cannot conceptualize the notion of miracles. Altering the question may help some younger children understand what is being asked. An alternative might be, "If I had a magic wand (magic lamp) and was to wave (rub) it over you head and the problem that brought you here disappeared, what would be different and what would you like to see yourself do?" For students who have difficulty answering miracle and magic wand questions, this hypothetical question may be effective: "Picture yourself 6 months from now and the problem that brought you here has been solved. What would be different about you that would tell you that we no longer need to meet?" After asking this initial hypothetical miracle question, the counselor persistently clarifies, using the client's own words to fine tune the responses until the goals are well developed.

Unspecific Miracles

Often, students give answers that aren't behaviorally specific, and their answers must be clarified:

S: If this miracle happened, I'd wake up in the morning and I'd be happier.

C: And when you are happier, what would you be doing (*specific actions*) that would tell you that you are happier?

S: Well, I guess I'd be smiling more. I guess I'd be talking more to my brother in a friendly way.

C: And when you are being friendly, what would you be doing, and how would your brother know you were being friendly?

S: I would say hello to him in the morning and maybe even ask him if he was doing anything special that day.

C: So, if that happened, how would your brother respond to you?

S: He would probably tell me, and we would talk about the things we would both be doing that day.

C: So, those are some of the clues that would tell you that you were happier. Who else would notice that you are happier?

As the sequence progressed, vague expressions of goals were detailed with specific behavioral descriptions. Questions also elicited the reactions of others who would notice changes taking place. Helping students to envision the ripple effects of their efforts reinforces their desire to initiate positive actions. The miracle question helps redirect students from problems to solutions. By detailing the concrete behaviors students will be doing to make their goals become a reality, hope rather than hopelessness is engendered as forgotten possibilities are rediscovered.

Changing behaviors changes students' views of the events, which in turn, change their feelings. The solution-focused approach differs from some other counseling approaches in that it builds on the belief that changes in behavior lead to changes in feelings. This contrasts with a more traditional counseling approach that assumes affective changes precede behavior changes.

Another vague response to the miracle question that is typical of students is, "I'd be doing my work." The counselor then follows up with, "Doing your work, what do you mean 'doing your work'? Can you tell me what that would look like?" "If I had a video camera and I were taping you, what would I be seeing you doing?" "What would your parents see you doing that would tell them you were doing your work?" "What would your teachers be reporting to me that would convince them that you are doing your work?" "If I were to walk

outside your classroom door, what would I see you doing that would tell me that you were doing your work?" "If your classmates were seeing you doing your work, what would they say they were seeing you do?" At this stage, specific concrete behavioral responses are sought and developed, resulting in videolike process responses. For example, the student might respond, "I'd be sitting in my desk, I'd be looking at the teacher, I'd be writing down notes." Students' answers provide them with a so-called mental video of themselves accomplishing successful concrete goals.

Impossible or Improbable Miracles

Student clients may respond to a hypothetical solution question with an impossible or improbable goal. They may want their divorced parents to reunite, deceased relatives to come back to life, or friends who have moved away to move back. They realize counselors can't do anything to bring about these changes, but if this miracle happened, that would be their answer. A student's sense of loss often underlies these wishes. Discovering the underlying needs helps clients identify realistic goals in place of impossible or improbable wishes. Helpful questions can yield more realistic goals. For example, the counselor might ask, "That seems to mean a lot to you because. . . ." "What about this is so important to you?" In the example where the student wanted his parents reunited, the dialog might go as follows:

C: What difference would it make to you if that happened?

S: Then our whole family would be together again.

C: And what would having your whole family together do for you?

S: I would feel part of the family.

C: So, feeling like you're part of the family is a goal for you!

S: Yes, I want that. *(This now becomes the goal.)*

The counselor then uses the following kinds of questions to identify the behaviors that will indicate to the student that this goal is being

achieved: "When you were feeling like you're part of the family, what would you find yourself doing that would tell you this was happening? or, "If your father were noticing you feeling that you were part of the family, what would he say he would see you doing?"

Another example illustrates working with unlikely miracles:

C: So, you really miss your grandmother since she died. What's the thing you miss the most?

S: She made me feel comfortable to talk to when I had something on my mind, and she would really listen to me.

C: So, being comfortable with someone to talk to who really listens when you have something on your mind is what you would like to have happen?

S: Yes.

C: What would tell you that you were comfortable talking to someone about the things on your mind?

S: I would be relaxed.

C: And if you were relaxed, what would you be doing that would tell you this?

S: I would be sitting on the floor, looking in the other person's eyes.

C: If you were doing this, what would the person do in return?

S: They would be looking right in my eyes and talking in a soft voice.

"I Want Others to Be Different" Miracles

Students may also describe their miracles as wanting others to change because they view them as the problem. Students commonly think others must be the first to alter their behaviors before students will adjust their own behaviors. Counselors need to help students understand reciprocity—the notion that changes in one's own behavior produce behavior changes in others. Counselors can use these concepts to the client's advantage by applying the miracle question

process in a way that helps students recognize that they can initiate behavior changes. The following example illustrates how the miracle question can be used in this situation:

S: You say "miracles," well, if that were to happen, my teacher would start treating me fairly like she does the other kids.

C: So, suppose this miracle did occur, and the teacher was now treating you fairly like the other kids, what would that look like?

S: He would call on me when I raise my hand.

C: So, if he called on you when you raised your hand, what would you start doing differently?

S: I wouldn't talk in class without permission.

C: So, what would you be doing instead?

S: I would sit in my seat, look at the teacher, or be writing down what he says with my lips sealed.

C: What do you think he will do when he sees you acting this way?

S: He will probably be nicer to me.

C: Is that what you want to have happen?

S: I sure do.

C: So, doing those things you just described could possibly result in your teacher changing as well.

Helping students see the reciprocal cause and effect of small changes in their own behavior enables them to see possibility for change in others.

Detailed answers are important. Students' answers need to generate the specifics of how solutions can happen. Using the hypothetical perceptions of others is an effective method for developing details. Counselors can use interventions such as these: "If I were observing you . . . , what would I see? If your parents, teachers, friends were noticing you . . . , how would they describe it to me?" These are the important details that present pictures for students. Students can

begin to see the ripple effect of their own behaviors when the counselor engages in interchanges such as this: "When you are being more friendly by smiling and saying 'hello' first, what would your sister do in return?" "She would smile and maybe start a conversation." "And when that happens, what would you do then?"

The realization that changing one's behavior will result in others changing theirs is significant. This contrasts sharply with students' common belief that others have to change first. As noted earlier, of special importance is the knowledge that small changes lead to large changes and to more changes. Understanding these relationships helps clients move beyond the details of the small view to see the big picture. Students are empowered when they discover that they can initiate change in others by first initiating change in themselves.

"What Else" Questions

Counselors can use another technique to enhance the chance that clients will find instances of success and exceptions to problems. This is accomplished by asking, "What else will happen after this miracle has occurred?" The counselor then uses the same procedures as with the miracle question to elicit behavioral details. Repeating this sequence three or four times opens additional doors for students to expand their portraits of life without the problems.

Establishing Well-Developed Goals

Throughout the miracle-questioning sequence, goals should be stated as the presence of something or start of something (positive goal) rather than the absence of something or end of something (negative goal). Well-developed goals are described in concrete, behavioral terms that state in detail what the student will be doing when accomplishing the goal. Using *what* questions elicits answers that describe positive goal behaviors. As an example, a student has indicated that his goal is to be doing his work in class. But this goal is not specific enough to qualify as a well-developed goal. His description

of work is vague, lacking details that would tell him that he has behaviorally achieved his goal. To clarify, the counselor may ask, "What would you be doing that would show both you and your teacher that you were doing your work?" Or, "If I were sitting in your class watching you doing your work, what would I see you doing?" His response might be, "My book would be open, and I would be looking at the teacher." These two behaviors—keeping his book open and looking at the teacher—serve much like observable, measurable objectives that will lead to accomplishing his goal.

Another student may indicate her goal is to be happy when she is at school. "Happy" is not specific enough. The counselor needs to find what it will take to make the student happy by asking, "What will you be doing that will tell you that you are happy in school?" Or, "If your teacher were seeing you being happy in her class, what would she say she saw you doing?" Answers to these questions provide observable goals stated as the presence of something that can be replicated and recognized when achieved.

Well-developed goals also describe how clients will move toward their goals. Describing goals in process form gives a videolike quality that helps clients visualize themselves taking the steps toward their goals. Asking how questions encourages clients to describe goals with verbs ending in "ing" or in sequences of action. This, in turn, produces a videolike image that captures possibilities clients may have not envisioned previously. Following through with the earlier example, the student who described his goal as doing his work by having his book open and looking at the teacher could be asked, "How would you do that?" His answer might be, "I would be bringing my book to class and putting it on my desk and opening it up to the right page, and I would be watching the teacher." The student who wants to be happy, as demonstrated by her having her head up and answering questions that may be asked of her, could be queried, "How will the teacher know this is happening?" Her reply might be, "She would see me looking at her and the other students, and she would notice that I am raising my hand when she asks questions." See Table 3.2 for guidelines and phrases regarding establishing well-developed goals.

Well-developed goals tend to be small. In other words, they need to be manageable and reachable so students avoid feeling frustrated.

TABLE 2.2 Establishing Well-Developed Goals

Guideline	*Language*
State in positive rather than negative terms as the presence of a behavior or the start of something.	*If you were not getting upset, what would you be doing instead or differently? What's the first thing you would be doing that would tell you you're on target?*
Describe in concrete, detailed behavioral terms.	*When you're being friendly, what would you be doing that would show that?*
Express in process terms.	*How have you managed to make that happen in spite of all the pressure? How will you be doing that?*
Frame as being the client's responsibility, using his or her power.	*What would you be doing differently that would show you were mellow?*

discouraged, or overwhelmed. By keeping goals small, students will be able to recognize small changes. In contrast, with large goals that call for significant changes, students may fail to notice the small but significant indexes of progress. Their attention to the big picture overwhelms and may even conceal the small steps of progress along the way. The student examples presented thus far clearly illustrate small goals calling for small changes that students can easily recognize.

Case Study: Using the Miracle Question

The following is one of several case studies, taken from actual cases, that will be carried throughout the book to demonstrate components of the solution-focused model. In this example Sue, a 13-year-old eighth-grade middle school student, is working to set goals. Her reason for seeing me was to improve her relationship with her

mother by being more honest with her. Sue also wanted to be able to avoid doing things with her friends that got her in trouble. (C = Counselor; S = Sue)

C: Here is the strange question I'm going to ask you. If a miracle happened tonight when you went to bed, and when you woke up in the morning, suppose all your problems are gone about this—all solved and no longer there. And you didn't know the miracle happened because you were sleeping. What would be the first thing in the morning that would tell you, that you would notice—the first small sign that would say this miracle has happened?

S: Probably my mom would say, "Do you want to go out tonight with your friends and do something with your friends?" because she told me it would take her awhile because I lied to her this weekend. She'd probably say, "I trust you now."

Sue's answer to the miracle question emphasized gaining her mother's trust, therefore, it was necessary to get her to provide the details describing what she would be doing that would cause her mother to trust her.

C: What would she say you would be doing for her to be saying that?

S: I'd have to build her trust back up to me. I'd have to take it one day at a time, and I would have to prove to her that I don't run so much and just prove to her that I can be trusted and not be doing stuff behind her back.

Her response still does not indicate the details of her behaviors that would show her mother what she will be doing, therefore, soliciting the specific actions she will be taking is paramount.

C: How would she know that? What would she say would be the first thing she would notice about you that would tell her you could now be trusted?

S: I would be truthful with her. If she asks me a question, I will face the truth.

Once a specific behavioral response is provided by the client, additional answers to the miracle question are sought.

C: What else would your mother notice after this miracle?

S: She would notice I've changed and because of how I act.

C: How would she know that? What would she tell me had changed?

S: That my attitude has gone away and that me and her were spending more time together than we used to. And I wouldn't ask her to let me do things that I know she wouldn't want me to do. 'Cause I always pressure her, like "Please, Mom, please." So, if she says no, I'll accept her answer.

C: All those things would certainly tell her that she could trust you more. What else would you see happening that would tell her this miracle had taken place?

S: I would spend more time with my mom, I wouldn't roll my eyes and not argue and accept her answers when she says no to me.

C: So, instead of rolling your eyes and giving your little voice, you'd be doing what?

S: I would say, "It's okay, that's fine," and I'd just go on and do what I was doing.

C: Okay. That would be one thing. Another thing that would tell you is that you would spend more time ... with her.

S: We would sit down and watch TV together 'cause I used to always be in my room talking on the phone. We would just share more awareness together.

C: You also said earlier that again, you would accept her answer when she says "no" to you. What do you mean by that?

S: I would just go, "Okay, that's fine. I won't go. I'll go some-where else. It is still not better to you then, if you don't want

me to go there then. If you don't want me to go there so you won't worry about me then" and just accept it. I'll go somewhere else where I can go.

C: What is the first small sign that will tell you this miracle has happened?

S: I wouldn't go around the house yelling at my mom. I would just go "Hi, Mom. How was your day at work? What are you all doing? Do you want to go do something?" And when Mom asks me to go outside and feed the cat, I'd say, "Sure, I'll feed the cat, the birds, and put the dog out." I used to be like, "Yeah, sure. I don't feel like feeding no cat." I could even fold towels 'cause I hate folding towels. Like she used to always ask me to fold the towels real quick, and I'd be like talking on the phone or watching TV. "No, I'm not folding no towels for you."

C: What would happen if you did all these things?

S: My mom would be like, "Are you sick?" and she would start trusting me and let me go out with my friends again.

Summary

SFBC emphasizes establishing well-developed goals that are detailed in concrete behavioral terms. Goal development is further enhanced by asking hypothetical solution questions. The key hypothetical question associated with this approach is the miracle question. The miracle question provides a means for students to fantasize about what life would be like without their problems or what life would be like if they were attaining their goals.

Chapter 3 presents the next steps in the SFBC process. These steps include discovering exceptions or instances of success that have gone unrecognized, assessing how these exceptions or successes were made to occur, using scales to evaluate progress, and constructing a message that includes a homework task.

Practice Exercise

Think about some problem that has been bothering you—something you want to stop happening. Answer the following questions about your situation.

- What would you like to see yourself do, instead of what you are presently doing?
- Suppose tonight when you go to sleep, a miracle happens while you are sleeping so you are unaware of this. However, when you woke up, the problem you identified earlier was no longer a problem. What would you notice you were doing differently that would tell you this miracle occurred?
- If you noticed that you were no longer doing something you wanted to stop doing, what would be happening to replace what you wanted to stop doing?
- Who would be the first to notice any of these things you were now doing instead?
- How would they respond to you when they notice your different behavior?
- How would you respond to them in return?

By answering these questions, you would have partially experienced the goal-setting segment of the SFBC process—the segment that precedes the steps of identifying exceptions, scaling, and constructing a message, which follow in Chapter 3.

3

Discovering and Constructing Solutions

Once hypothetical pictures of success are developed and magnified, the next step is to look for instances when small pieces of students' miracles have already happened. These expressions of exceptions fall in two categories: (a) instances when some segments of students' goals are being attained and (b) situations when the students' problems are less severe or are absent altogether. Both categories arise when identifying solutions.

When discovering and constructing solutions, counselors direct students' attention to instances when solutions, however small, are happening. Even moments when students report they are a little less sad or upset indicate a solution is present. Because students typically overlook their small successes or "problemless" moments, these

positive occurrences fade from memory. "Problems ignored grow, solutions ignored disappear" so aptly describes what most clients experience. Therefore, rediscovering unrecognized, recurring solutions is the task for counselors and students.

Solution-focused counselors firmly believe that all students experience times when they are being successful or they are not encountering their problems. As an example, consider students who seek to live a healthy lifestyle instead of taking drugs. Even one time when they experienced the urge to use drugs but told themselves, "I'll skip it and wait another hour"—this is a repeatable solution. Answering the query, "How did you make it happen for this one time?" empowers students as they recognize their resources. Counselors can then offer support and reinforcement in the form of cheerleading in recognition of students' efforts.

Rediscovering Unrecognized Solutions

Counselors introduce this step to students by conveying the notion that some parts of the student's miracle have taken place. This demonstrates the counselor's belief in the student's resources. Counselors must listen carefully to each student's comments to catch words and phrases that imply things are working for them. Even more important, they must train students to listen for their own successes rather than failures. Students who are failing every class except one are exhibiting signs of some success in the class they are passing. Solution-based counselors focus on the class the student is passing and how the student is making that happen. Listening for even slight grades of difference furnishes clues to the client's resources for success.

Students' language can hold the key to spotting these small successes. Phrases or words such as *most of the time, nearly always, sometimes,* or *generally* suggest exceptions. For example, if the problem is there most of the time, then it implies that the problem is not present at least some of the time. Focusing on times when problems

are a little less severe or when failure is not as pronounced also indicates successes that can be developed. Counselors can help students recognize the presence of solutions by reframing clients' views of their situation.

Just as in general counseling, closed questions—those that can be easily answered "no"—are to be avoided. Questions that begin with *are, could,* or *can* may limit clients' ability to spot exceptions (e.g., "Are there times when some of this miracle is already happening?" Or, "Can you recall a time when this miracle took place even a little?" Or, "Could you tell me when this miracle has already happened?") This sort of phrasing implies that there may or may not be times when the miracle is happening. Because solutions tend to evaporate when overlooked, clients habitually have trouble identifying exceptions to their difficulties.

The answer lies in phrasing the exception question with the presupposition that some of the miracle already has transpired. This helps students stretch their minds to find instances of success. The interview process to this point sends a strong message to students that counselors trust them to identify their own goals for counseling and believe they are capable of envisioning what their lives would be like without the problem. From those seeds, counselors now expect clients to develop the capacity to see their successes. Interventions that begin with "Tell me about sometimes," "I would like to know when," "How close have you come," or "The last time some part of" imply some amount of success has occurred.

The following case illustrates the discovery of instances of success. Maria is a 10-year-old elementary school student in the fifth grade who was constantly worried about her mother's hospitalizations. Her mother was diagnosed as having a bipolar mood disorder, and her mood swings scared Maria. Maria's schoolwork suffered because of her habitual thoughts about her mother. Her goal for counseling was to replace her negative thoughts with more pleasant ones. In exploring instances when she had enjoyable thoughts, Maria talked about riding her bike, playing games with her mother and friends, reading and writing at school, and the time she was able to "click off" her negative thoughts so she could have more pleasant ones. The

focus immediately went to the time she was able to click off negative and subsequently click in positive thoughts. Highlighting this significant event helped Maria remember how she made this happen for herself. She recalled changing her thoughts from worrying about her mother to sports, music, and school. This was a resource that could now be replicated as needed.

After noting instances of achievement, the process continues by detailing the behavioral specifics of the exception. Recalling the features of their resources promotes a sense of accomplishment.

Patience and prodding may be necessary to identify exceptions for some children who may say "I don't know" or claim "I don't think it's ever happened." Counselors may reply, "Now think about that for a minute, before you answer so quickly. When has that happened even just a little bit?" Sometimes focusing on what happened that week or day helps students identify triumphs. Verbally sharing counselor notes about how students described their miracles provides a quick review from which to draw exceptions.

Mac is a sixth grade boy who had been in trouble repeatedly at school for breaking rules and failing his classes. His goal was to start following school rules and improve his grades. When asked about when some of his miracle had taken place, he responded, "That miracle hasn't happened" (C = Counselor; M = Mac)

C: Now think about it Mac, for just a minute. How about today; when has it happened today just a little bit?

M: (Pause.) Well, you know, I guess it has. When I left the library today, the teacher asked us to walk in a straight line. I did.

C: Is that different?

M: Oh yeah, I'm usually bouncing off the lockers all the time. Oh yeah, in the lunchroom today, I ran and you're not supposed to run in the lunchroom. The teacher called me back, and I came back and I walked.

C: Is that different for you?

M: Oh yeah, I usually keep going. I don't ever come back. Then they get mad and chase me down and put me in detention.

Through persistence, Mac was able to identify times when moments of his miracle were happening. He couldn't think of any instances of this at first; however, focusing on events of that day enabled him to identify exceptions.

Empowering Through Recognition of Students' Resources

Once instances of success are identified, students can then discover *how* they took these steps toward their miracles. As students understand how they bring about changes, a "mindmap" develops, showing them paths to their goals.

Mindmapping

Mindmapping refers to the creation of a road map of thoughts that guides individuals to their destination. Mindmaps are built by recalling and reinforcing instances when clients' behaviors led to success, however small. This creates a sort of imprint of thoughts about what succeeds. Mindmapping seeks to reinforce thought patterns that will ultimately create what might be called productive habits—habitual ways of behaving successfully in areas that caused difficulty in the past. Recognizing their resources, responsibilities, and strengths is the first step in helping students feeling empowered to take charge of themselves.

Some counselor interventions that develop mindmaps to solutions are as follows:

- "How did you *manage* to do that?"
- "What was *different* about this (or that) time?"
- "What did you *do* to make it work for you then?"
- "How do you account for these changes?"
- "That's so different. What brought that about in you?"
- "What kind of different thoughts were you having then?"
- "How did you do it?"

The answers to miracle questions are sometimes difficult to answer. "I don't know" replies can be addressed with "If you did know" responses. Patient persistence in rephrasing this question often elicits answers students can use to educate themselves about how to meet their goals.

Sometimes, students will give the credit to someone else for their accomplishments. The counselor shifts responsibility for success to the student by using the "I bet you have been told that before and it didn't make any difference" intervention. The following example describes this intervention (C = Counselor; S = Student):

C: *Tell me about a time when you were tempted not to do your schoolwork, but you did it anyway. How did you do it? How did you manage to make that happen?*

S: My teacher told me that I had better do my work or I won't amount to anything. [With this explanation, the responsibility of doing his work this time was the teacher's.]

C: You know, I bet you've heard that before from your teacher, haven't you?

S: Yeah!

C: *And you still didn't do your work?*

S: Yeah!

C: So today was different. What made today different for you?

S: I decided that I'm as smart as the other kids, so I can do it.

C: So, that was a new decision for you. How did you make that decision this time?

S: I told myself I want to pass to the fifth grade, so I did my assignment.

This intervention caused the student to realize he was the one responsible for his success. Another path could have been followed in this situation—to determine how the student was able to listen seriously to the teacher this time and heed her advice. The counselor might have said, "So, you often hear that from your teacher, and it goes in

one ear and out the other. But today was different; you really listened to her. How were you able to do that this time?"

Cheerleading

Supporting and encouraging students' success with praise is called *cheerleading*. Students love to be acknowledged for their accomplishments, especially those students in need of counseling. Their worlds are abundant with comments that stress what's wrong with them. Discovering what is right with them and letting them know about it uplifts their outlook and boosts their self-esteem. Any instance of success or exceptions to problems, regardless of how small, warrants recognition. Counselors can communicate cheerleading by these means:

- Increasing the level of their voice to show how moved they are by students' efforts
- Expressing excitement when a new behavior is attempted
- Demonstrating that they are impressed with the maturity of students' thoughts or actions
- Expressing amazement with students' creative thinking or decision making
- Showing admiration for students' dedication and commitment to sticking with their new behaviors and not giving up

Counselors must not patronize students when cheerleading. It's essential that counselors truly mean what they express to their students; otherwise, they will appear insincere, negating everything that has been accomplished in the interview. The following are some examples of cheerleading leads:

"Really — you did that! What courage you showed."
"That's amazing that you could . . ."
"I'm really impressed with how you . . ."
"How did you figure that out?"
"Where did you learn to do that?"

"Did you say you were only 11 years old? But you think like a 14 year-old."

"How can you be that smart when you're only 7 years old?"

"How were you able to come up with those thoughts? Most kids your age wouldn't be able to think that clearly."

"That's unbelievable that you could remain calm under those circumstances; most people would have lost it, but you didn't."

Comments such as these reinforce successful attempts and encourage repeated efforts.

The following excerpt of the interview with Sue, which was begun in the previous chapter, illustrates identifying and reinforcing instances of success (C = Counselor; S = Sue):

C: Hmm. You've got some good ideas. You really do. Tell me about some times when some of this miracle is already happening?

S: Last night.

C: Really? Tell me about that.

S: I was playing Nintendo, and Mom asked me, "Can I interrupt you for a minute?" And I go, "Yeah, sure." And she goes, "Can you feed the cat real quick for me?" and I was like, "Yeah, sure." 'Cause she was like folding towels and cooking supper and then I came in and she was folding towels and the pot was overboiling and I was like, "It's okay. I'll get it for you." And she was like, "Are you sure?" and I was like, "Yeah."

C: Well, what made that possible, 'cause usually you wouldn't do that?

S: Uh huh. I don't know. Probably, because I want me and my mom to get along and stuff.

C: So you realized this would help you to get along if you cooperated with her and helped her?

S: Uh huh. And then one day, she asked me if I had any dirty clothes in my room. I said, "Yeah," and she was like, "Can you get them out for me?" What am I going to do—say "No, not now. Why don't you come and get them?" Yeah, so I said, "Yeah, sure. I'll get them out." I really, I felt like, "No, I don't want to."

E: Gosh, you just did it, and you didn't give her a hassle?

S: Right. I didn't even say, "Hold on a second," and she didn't have to remind me or anything.

E: Wow! How did she react when you did that?

S: "Oh, thanks honey! You are really helping me out a lot." And she was like, "Are you feeling okay?"

E: (Laughing.) That's the best reaction!

S: Like when she asked me to go feed the cat and stop playing my Nintendo game. She was like, "Are you feeling okay?" You skipped the game for me."

E: And when she did that, how did you respond to her?

S: "Yeah, Mom. I'm feeling okay. I'm just trying to help you out."

E: You told her you just wanted to help her out?

S: Uh huh.

These are incidents of students achieving their goals and instances when they are problem free. Their moments suggest solutions are present, and illuminating these times helps student recognize their resources. Through autodiagnosis, methods students use to bring about their solutions are explored and reinforced through praising and cheerleading their efforts.

Scaling a Baseline and Progress

Scaling is used to determine where students are in terms of the goals they have set. Students are asked to rate themselves on a scale from 0 (lowest) to 10 (highest) with respect to attainment of their goals.

This provides a baseline to measure progress. Students' assessments typically reflect some level of success because they generally report scores greater than 0. Ratings above 0 suggest that things have been worse, and something has been done to make them better. Helping students identify how they made things better empowers them to recognize their resources. In those rare cases when students report they are at 0, counselors can remind students that coming in for counseling indicates willingness to work and desire to make things better. Discovering how they have come to believe that things could be better reflects hope and progress.

Asking students what it would take to move up one number on their scales helps them identify the steps needed to progress toward their goals. When students answer the miracle question and questions about instances of success, they are possibilities they may not be able to construct otherwise.

Scaling Techniques for Measuring Baseline Goal Attainment

One of the difficulties with the counseling field is the problem with measuring outcomes. The scaling method used with SFBC provides a means to quantify clients' progress. With scaling, students rate themselves on a scale from 0 to 10, with 10 being the day after their miracles have happened and the problems that brought them to counseling have been solved and 0 being when things were at their absolute worst. In terms of the continuum, where are they right now? Typically, clients tend to classify themselves between a 3 and a 6. Here the counseling interview itself causes improvement because the student begins to realize successes that were previously unrecognized. Ratings above 0 indicate that things have been worse. However, something is better now, even if only a little. Identifying what is better is exciting and how students are causing that to happen grants not the solutions already available to them.

Soliciting information from students about how they have reached their ratings on the scale helps them understand where they are and how they arrived there. The same sort of questioning process is used in benchmarking and evidences successes.

Children aged 5½–7 years old may have difficulty discriminating among numbers. Using a smaller scale with fewer choices or a series of 10 faces (with numbers under them), with a pronounced frown on one end and a pronounced smile on the other end, may work more effectively. A 1–5 rank order also may be used. Younger children tend to be more visual and have an easier time identifying them using an order-using props such as these.

Clients rarely respond to the scaling question with a 0 rating. If it should happen, focus on the student's presence at the counselor's office as reflecting anticipation of making things better. How did the student decide to come to see the counselor in spite of the seemingly hopeless situation? How did the student manage to get out of bed, get dressed up and dressed, catch the school bus, get to class, and show up at the counselor's door that morning? These actions say something about a desire to improve things. What gave the student the idea that there is even hope to resolve the difficulties? And why the student is not at a lower (0—how is the student able to do as well as he or she is doing "in other words, asking why things are not worse than they are suggests students have the ability to cope. The coping strategies students use to just get through their days are useful solutions that need to be developed.

Identifying the Behaviors
Leading to Improvement

Once students have assessed their placement on the scale of 1 to 10 and discussed how they would, it happen and the reciprocal effect of these actions, the counselor can move to explore what they would have to do to move up one number closer to their ideal goal. Because taking small steps increases the chance of reaching the eventual goals, the counselor helps the student identify one gains that are realistically achievable. All the preceding steps—identifying goals in the problem, exploring the student's questions and hypothetical solutions, identifying exceptions to problems and evaluation of success—prepare students to think in solution terms. Encouraging further success becomes easier.

To encourage further progress, counselors ask students questions such as these: What are you going to have to do to move up one number

team observe behind one-way glass and periodically phone the counselor to share suggestions. At the conclusion of the session, counselors excuse themselves to consult with the team to process the session and prepare a message for the client(s). The message consists of three parts: (a) compliments, (b) bridging statements, and (c) tasks.

Although this procedure may at first seem strange and unnecessary, it has benefits. This strategy gives counselors a few minutes to process the meeting, communicates to clients that the counselors are giving careful thought to the session, and provides counselors time to review their notes and consult with the team to construct a message that will best help their clients. However, school counselors do not typically have the resources to work on teams. Instead, they use this time at the end of the session as a quiet time to reflect on the session and to write a message. There are some practical tips for making this reflection time comfortable for student clients as well as productive for you as the counselor.

In most cases, counselors leave the room to reflect and write the message, but there are some alternatives. You can give students a written assignment to be completed while you construct the message. For example, you may ask students to describe what they learned in today's session, describe what their miracle would look like, or describe what they would see themselves doing to show they were on track for making things better.

Messages are a critical part of the SFBC process. They serve as a positive reinforcement for what has occurred in the interview by reminding students of their resources and strengths and providing a homework assignment that enables students to keep on track toward accomplishing their goals.

Note Taking

During the meeting, counselors take notes that focus on what will be used to compliment students. To construct a message, compliments are drawn from goal statements, responses to the miracle question, instances of success or exceptions to problems, and scaling responses. When students observe counselors only noting positives, successes, strengths, and resources, students feel reinforced to continue what is working for them. I have noticed that students may

even remind counselors to note something positive the counselor may not have written down. Note taking can be distracting. To minimize the distraction, I have found that preparing a note sheet before the interview with the topics listed helps reduce writing time. Also repeating to the student what is being written minimizes distractions and creates a smoother transition to follow-up comments.

If you plan to leave your office to construct a message, this procedure is best introduced at the beginning of the initial interview so that students will not be surprised when you announce that you need a few minutes to think about the meeting, look over your notes, and construct a message. This is a typical way for counselors to introduce the message-writing phase:

> Well, I have run out of questions. Do you have any questions for me? Are there any other things I need to know to help you? If not, I need to take a few minutes to think about everything that you have said and review my notes so I can write you a message you can take with you. While I'm gone, you may want to think about what was the most helpful part of our meeting and why you think this.

With elementary-school-aged children, it works well to remain with them while writing the message. I have found that asking them to draw a picture of what their miracle would look like helps them to review what they learned in the session. The counselor and student discuss the picture, which also reveals the session's impact on the child, before reading the message. The example shown in Figure 3.1 of a picture drawn by a 10-year-old elementary school student shows how she was able to click on more pleasant thoughts, such as taking part in sports, riding her bike, and playing games, rather than obsessing about her mother's health, which had interfered with her doing her schoolwork and enjoying herself at home.

After the counselor reads the message, the student gets a copy and a copy is retained for the counselor's files. Because messages are all positive, citing students' strengths and attributes, most students are willing to share their notes with significant others. When students show off their messages to their parents, the parents are exposed to

Figure 3.1. An Elementary School Student's Drawing of Her Miracle

positive aspects of their children they may have overlooked. Seeing positives in the message helps parents look for strengths in their children that were previously ignored. The message not only rein-

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fosters students' successes but also helps others recognize strengths in students as well.

Compliments

Counselors listen carefully for strengths, solutions, and what is working—even if just a little. And they look for times when things are not quite as bad as at other times. Students' comments provide the material for the compliment section of the message. Compliments are drawn from the counselor's recordings of all the client's successes along with the concrete details associated with each accomplishment. Each message should include at least three compliments, each referring to specific behaviors exhibited by the student. Compliments are like seeds that can be cultivated later when the task is assigned at the end of the message. The following are among the characteristics students display that can serve as the basis for compliments. Keep in mind that many of these phrases are interchangeable. For example, both thoughts and decisions can be growth producing or healthy.

- Actions that indicate courage, healthy risk taking, compromise, follow through, and so forth
- Efforts that demonstrate strength, a challenge, growth, planning, and so forth
- Commitments that show loyalty, effort, dedication, devotion, and so forth
- Attitudes that reflect tolerance, acceptance, flexibility, common sense, helpfulness, and so forth
- Thoughts that are creative, positive, rational, sensitive, insightful, and so forth
- Desires that are realistic, healthy, sensible, growth producing, and so forth
- Decisions based on judgment, consequences, opportunities, options, and so forth
- Attributes of being mature, smart, understanding, empathetic, cooperative, and so forth

The following compliments were part of a message presented to a sixth-grade boy who wanted to pass to the seventh grade but was failing in school.

Counselor's Message:

I'm really impressed with the commitment you have to do better in school. Your improvement in your grades this last week shows that you are capable of doing well in school. Getting an A and a B on recent tests proves that you really want to do better, and you know how to make it happen for yourself by studying 30 minutes each night and going to bed by 10 p.m.

Your desire to feel better about yourself by getting better grades tells me that you really care about yourself, your mom, your teachers, and your friends. You also recognize that it's important to pass so you can be with the kids your own age next year, and your recent grades demonstrate that you are smart and you can be successful.

The compliments in this message reflect back the student's own words in the interview to reinforce specific behaviors that move us back toward achieving his goal.

Bridging Statements

A bridging statement connects the compliment and task portions of the message. First, the compliments set the stage by identifying solutions. Then, based on these solutions, the bridge provides a rationale for a task that will be assigned. A bridge consists of two parts: (a) a brief reference to what the student wants (the goal) as a result of counseling and (b) a short statement intended to initiate the task. Examples of this include the following:

1. *Because of your efforts (desire) to improve your grades I would urge you to . . .*
2. *To help you remain focused (on getting to school on time), it would be in your best interest to . . .*

- To keep you going on the path to (restraining value where your dad yells at you), I would suggest ...
- Because you realize (recognize, understand) the benefits (of making friends), it would be helpful ...
- As a result of your commitment to (attend school instead of doing drugs), you may want to ...

In the situation mentioned previously with the student who wanted to pass to the sixth grade, the bridge that followed the compliments was this: "Because of your desire to do better in school and feel better about yourself as well, I would like you to ...." These bridging statements are natural links connecting goals and solutions to homework tasks.

Tasks

The third part of the message is the task or homework assignment. Contrary to other theoretical approaches, the assignment is vague. Throughout counseling, counselors have conveyed confidence in their students' ability to name their own goals and identify what life would be like if they were reaching their goals. They have underscored their clients' ability to bring about instances of success that have helped them progress. Essentially, the intervene translates into a boost to self-esteem that demonstrates the counselors' faith in the student's ability to succeed. The assignment of vague tasks conveys the clear signal that students are trusted to complete the homework in ways that work best for them. The vagueness also encourages students' creativity. For counselors who are concerned that their students may get stuck in following through with a vague task, it helps to recognize that the compliment portion of the message spells out the details of students' successes and provides a plan for action.

The following tasks exemplify the types of assignments that work with these circumstances:

- When students can identify instances of success or exceptions to problems, assign them to (a) do more of the successes or

exceptions, (b) notice and continue to do what has been working for them, or (c) do what it takes to move up one number on their scale of 0 to 10.

- When students are unclear about their goals or are reluctant to take action or focus on their problems, assign them to (a) observe the times when things are better, (b) notice when exceptions are happening, (c) pay attention to when the problem is less intense, (d) notice what they are doing when their are moving in the right direction, or (e) pretend that their miracle is happening for one day.
- When students don't recognize a problem or can't come up with a goal for counseling, complainant them for problems and successes, but do not assign a task.

In the previous example with the student who was failing but wanted to pass, the following task was assigned: Notice between now and next week, when we meet again, the times you have been successful in doing your homework, especially how you keep yourself on track when you're tempted to get sidetracked.

For Stan's case cited earlier, the notes to follow him the counselor's notes from the interview and the accompanying message prepared for Stan:

Goal:

Wants to be honest with her mother
Improve her relationship with her
Wants to avoid doing things she knows are wrong that her friends ask her to do

Miracle:

Mom would say, "I trust you, you can go out with your friends."
Be truthful with Mom because I don't want to hurt her.
My attitude would change. I would cooperate. I would say "Okay, that's fine."
Spend more time at weekends with Mom, watch TV together, share moments

to do things and and the lessons you've already begun these things

Finally

Because of your commitment to make things better at home

Jack

I would suggest you continue to do those things that you have just started that are working for you and notice what you are doing to move up the scale one notch or so

Summary

Through rediscovering unrecognized solutions and exceptions, students are empowered to pursue their goals. Scaling techniques offer methods to assess how far students have come and what they need to do to be even more successful. The meeting concludes by giving messages that indicate compliments and homework tasks that are constructed from counselors' notes to reinforce students' competencies and efforts to improve. Chapter 9 presents an entire SFBC session demonstrating the components addressed in this and the previous chapter.

Practice Exercise

From the previous exercise in Chapter 3, bring to mind the answers you gave to the miracle question and subsequent questions. Please complete the following exercise without consulting the following questions:

1. Recall some times when some of your miracle occurred even just in a small way—perhaps some instances when things weren't quite as bad or when things were a little bit better.

4

Connecting the Pieces

The coachee's answers to these types of questions may not be perfect, specific, or they may indicate an intention or a moment in time in retrospect. When this occurs, it is important to clarify a detailed picture of what coachee could be doing when the desired happens.

When we ask you were right, the answer was no or when I'd asked you can also question to help expand the options coachee does not yet see possible.

In addition to the three types of questions, it's also to use questions that direct more values to significant effects, such as the following:

- What is it that you have been doing differently, or that you would be doing differently, when this occurs?

3. Third Type

These questions address the questions such as "Imagine thinking about the time could have to make this or do a little smaller.

- When is it by the time could you that you will notice that will you have the answer is happening to happen?
- What could be the time to say that this answer is happening? What will that be?
- When you are no longer having your concern resolved, what, specific, do you would have done the time things that to you have noticed that you will that you different such to notice to have you to be right to be to make your time to happen?
- If it was the so why could you be able to have noticed this to your problem, what could have you thought to do differently to you can you that you would be more or starting to consider what you to make to do so?

4. Exception Questions

These questions identify those exceptions – the times when they are already considering solutions or parts of the solution. Exception questions are a good way to find coachees' resources for the concern and show the confidence. It is recommended to ask the exception about the concern

[illegible] Engagement is a way to help students decide if a career or academic path is right for them (p.30-31).

- "Did you discuss the topics in this unit of the course? Can you identify engagement – or not – in each of the [illegible]?"

As students enroll, the instructor or their tutor can ask [illegible] questions about [illegible] engagement, the amount of time they can dedicate to [illegible] [illegible] and [illegible] engagement, success, and responsibilities.

- "[illegible] discuss what it will take to [illegible] in [illegible]. What [illegible] [illegible] do you think you'll [illegible]? What [illegible] will be the most challenging for you personally?"
- "[illegible] discuss the time [illegible] you will [illegible] [illegible] the [illegible] [illegible] the time [illegible] is required. How will you manage it with [illegible]?"
- "What [illegible] you [illegible] to [illegible] successful?"

In response to this [illegible], [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]

Follow up with questions that ascertain what they have done to reach their present rating. Generally, students rate themselves as being higher than their lowest point, and discovering what they have done to cause this is motivating. Cheerleading is effective here, along with helping students identify the details of their success.

- "So that right, you are at a 3? What have you done that has enabled you to get to a 3?"

To help students progress up the scale and accomplish small, attainable goals, ask them to identify the things they will need to do to advance one point on the scale:

- "What do you need to do to get you to a 4? How will you do that?"

Sometimes, identifying possible obstacles to their goal (flagging the minefield) is also productive here:

- "My guess is that even though you know what to do to not talk to your buddies in class when the teacher is speaking, how are you going to handle it when your friends initiate a conversation?"

6. The Message

Unresolved issues should be addressed by finding out if any other information would be pertinent for you to know and by answering any questions the client may have. At this point in the process, clients seldom have additional information or questions.

- "Is there anything else I should know or any questions that you have before I take a few minutes to compose my thoughts about our meeting and come back to you with a message?"

This step involves composing a note to the student that reflects compliments as well as abridging statement that provides a rationale

for the task the client is assigned to accomplish before the next session.

When initiating the process, a road map can be used to help guide the beginning solution-focused counselor in sequence. Because note-taking is established as part of the routine, the counselor can use a bifold notepad to record information for the message. A prepared guide can be placed on one side of the notepad to serve as a reminder to keep the counselor on track until the model is mastered. The road map shown in Figure 4.1 has been used successfully for this purpose (I suggest making a full-sized copy for easy reference).

Case Study
Showing Session One

As you read this case, you may want to take notes so you can practice constructing a message. Then you can compare your message with the one presented at the end of this chapter. This case involves Fedor, a 12-year-old, sixth-grade boy sent to me because he has been suspended from school often. The student provides additional background in the course of the interview that follows. The opening explanation of the process has been deleted to avoid repeating previous information (C = Counselor, F = Fedor).

C: What did you come to see me about?

F: I guess my attitude and behavior.

C: What do you mean, "attitude and behavior"?

F: Sometimes, when I raise my hand first and teacher calls somebody else, I get mad 'cause I raised my hand first. When some of the teachers tell me to do something, I don't do it. I just get an attitude about it, and I don't follow directions.

(Developing the goal)

C: So, what would you like to be able to do as a result of our meetings?

Road Map to Solutions
Explore Note Taking and Message
Goal Setting
"What is your goal in coming here?"
Negative Goal
Absence of Something
Positive Goal
Presence of Something
Explore Details
What would you be doing that is solid about that
I don't want to
"What differences does this make?"
"How can I help you with this?"
"How is this a problem for you?"
"What will the change or others do for you?"
"What will they do if they don't change?"
What-If Questions
"If a miracle happened tonight, and you woke up tomorrow with your
problem was solved, what would be the first sign that it occurred?"
"What would you be doing differently?"
Who would be the first to notice the difference in you?"
"What would they do?"
"How would they respond to you when they observe this difference?"
"How would you respond to them on noticing?"
What else would be different/happening after this miracle is a success
Relationship Questions
"What would your (number, friend, partner, sibling, etc.) see to be different
after this success?" "How would they see you differently?" "How would you see them differently?"
And when you observe them in the different world you
what will you do differently in response to them?"
Scale Questions
"On a scale of 0 to 10, where "0" is when things were like at our first session and "10" is the day after a miracle, where are you right now?" If beyond 0:
"What do you have to do to move up to 1?"
Single-Session Work "What will you do if
Doubting (Don't Know) Exit Work
Message
Compliment (If Goal Is Met) Bridge Task

Figure 4.1. Road Map to Solutions

(This map has overlapped on a copier. It is correct.)

P: I guess, learn to do what I'm told.

E: Sounds like you really answer that.

P: When I raise my hand [over] and the teacher sees me and they call on somebody else. I get mad. I get mad.

E: And when you get mad, what do you do?

P: Throw a fit.

E: And what does that look like?

P: I would just start squabbling and stuff, mouthing out words and disturbing the class. I want to stop doing that.

(Refrained from the absence as a the presence of contrition)

E: So, what would you have to do different rather than throw a fit?

P: Just put my hand down or I just hold my hand up and just wait 'till she calls on me. Sometimes it distressing a bit. I just raise my hand up until she calls on me.

E: Just keep your hand up.

P: Or just let my hand down.

(Unveiling specific behaviors)

E: So you would like to know your hand up until she does call on you or just put your hand down. What would you be doing or what would you be thinking when you aren't getting called on?

P: Just leave it down and if I know the answer, not write the answer on my paper yesterday or throwing a fit, don't write my answer down.

(Clarification)

C: Okay, that's pretty clever. So, you avoided just by kind of checking yourself out by working it down to one if you got it right.

P: Yeah.

C: How did you come up with that idea?

P: I just came up with it.

C bursts out laughing.

C: That's pretty creative, you know. Did you know that you are creative?

P: Sometimes.

C gets back to a series of questions.

C: I have a strange question to ask that may be hard to answer. When you went to go to sleep tonight and because you were sleeping you didn't know this was happening, that is miracle occurred. When you woke up tomorrow morning, all your problems are solved. Gone, just disappeared. And when you woke up, you said to yourself, "Something happened during the night because all of my problems are gone. My attitude, my behaviors, those problems have all just disappeared." What would you notice that was different when you woke up that would tell you that this miracle happened?

P: When I get to school, I won't have attitudes.

Skipping from the absence to the presence of something.

C: Okay, so the attitude wouldn't be gone. When it's gone, what would be in place of it? Because it disappeared, something has got to happen or take its place. What would take the place of that attitude?

P: My education.

C: What do you mean by that?

A: My words – I'd be done on my words from an my attitude.

(Creating Levels Of Abstraction)

Q: How would you know you were on your work? How would your teacher know you were on your work? What would your teacher see?

A: I would be looking in the book, like I'm looking at me, and I'd have my eyes on the book instead of talking to people.

(Questions that capture sensorial effects)

Q: Okay, so your eyes would be looking at the book, you wouldn't be talking to people, you'd be looking at your book. And if that happened, how do you think your brothers would treat you?

A: They would probably be more to me, and call on me more when I raise my hand.

Q: And if that were to happen, what would you do?

A: I would do what they tell me to do.

("What Else" questions)

Q: It sounds like you all would get along better. What else do you think might be going on where there would be no attitude? There would be something else to do there. What else do you see yourself doing?

A: I don't know.

Q: If you did know. That's a tough question to look hard question I'm asking you. Some of the questions I'll ask you going to be real tough to answer. This is one of them. It's a lot hard to answer that question.

A: I'd be better dig it more.

Checking out the behaviors

P: How do we behaving. What would that look like? If I were sitting outside your room, and I were seeing you behave, what would I see you doing?

P: Looking any words on the board. What we're supposed to do is use the board. So once we get to class, I'll sit in any seat, write in my agenda. Then pull my agenda up, get some paper out, and be ready to work.

T: Okay, so sit in your seat, write out an agenda.

P: Yeah. Write out what we're going to do that's on the board. That's what I write in my agenda.

T: Okay, so you would see what's on the agenda for the day, and you would write it in your agenda book.

P: Yeah. The agenda has what the date is and what we're supposed to do that day.

Exercise that exposes an ignored pattern

T: Tell me then, if you were following and doing your work as you just described, what would you see your teachers as as values?

P: They would probably be saying "Good, good job. Keep it up. Do this, this, this." And my grades would go up.

T: So, if your teachers were like that with you, how do you think you would respond to them?

P: I would be smiling and work harder to get my grades up.

T: So, when they are very smiling and praising as we've seen, how would your teachers be with you?

P: They would be real happy and would trust me more, and I'd like that.

"What for" questions

A: Okay, so the suggestion is that you can do your work and leave all your work in your bedroom. Look, you know what? How do you know all this stuff?

B: That's what we're suggested to do.

A: Just kidding.

A: Yeah, but seven people don't communicate all that much at work. How do you remember all that?

B: They told us at the beginning of the school year you have to learn all your vocabs. Take five minutes, you're suggested to learn a couple vocabs language, pick a verb, anything in Hindi, and use ten words in a phrase. You are suggested to put those vocabs in as you're vocabs and write as you make anything in that day, so it's not to vocabs. And you're suggested to do it in the vocabs as you want. Once your vocab and it wasn't for, oh no to the phone. And you are suggested to carry your agenda and you're book with you.

A: And you remembered all that?

B: Yeah.

A: Yeah, but you're just a kid. I'm bogged all time, and you remember all that. That's crazy that you can remember all that. That can something to me about how you can think. You've got a good memory.

B: Thank You. — Yeah, I just suggestions think I got suggested what to.

A: Just kidding, and it "what for" previous.

A: Well, you can remember all that, I'm impressed. I'm impressed by things that they said you have to have. You have to have pig for your children, you have to have an agenda. It sounds to me like you do. Where Where else, it also, you told me that this school has happened?

JB I mean it could be the original Bible for Jewish—

JL Is there a point, "Rabbi Jonathan, does it change the way you—Now that it's published in a new translation?"

JB Yeah.

JL Again, there was a lot of pushing back. I'm grateful. But, you know, I'm looking, "How are religious Jews to see what happened to Job?" When the text presents the Satan dialogue, "Oh, you're wrong." Why is there a need to push back against that? Although, getting rid of the Satan dialogue would change the text.

JB It's extremely strong grounds for me. But I have not spent responsibility for a whole Bible.

JL So people are surprised by you. You know, in Why We Can't Wait, you write, "Why is the Bible so long? Why is it so complex? Why is it so full of contradictions?" Is that the kind of—

JB Yeah.

JL Because, I mean, when I wrote my paragraph on the Bible for [redacted], I'm pretty sure that I was—I thought all Jewish kids had to read Genesis. I was in a very conservative synagogue, so I had to do the whole bit, whatever. Where did you do that?

JB Hebrew school. I'm not Jewish.

JL But you're fully conversant. I'm not Jewish.

JB Yeah.

JL My point is, as a Jew, I'm pretty much convinced that Genesis basically is myth.

JB Yeah.

JL But what is a reflection of, "What is it supposed to tell us?"

JB My reading is that it's—the Torah is a compilation of different sources, and the Genesis story is a compilation of different sources. And it's not a history book. It's not a science book. It's a book of religious instruction. It's a book of religious instruction. And it's a book of religious instruction that's been put together by different people at different times. And it's not a history book. It's not a science book. It's a book of religious instruction.

P: I did what they told me to do and just did my work. And then I just got put on the Honors Team.

Chortling:

C: Huh. So, you can do it? You can do it? If you want to, because you are smart enough to do that.

P: Yeah, I'm smart enough to do that. But see, when I'm around my friends, I'm talkative and stuff. I just talk to them too much when I'm around my friends. When I'm not around them, I just do my work and stuff.

C: Yeah, that's what you were saying before. You like to talk a lot with your friends, and that kind of takes over from doing the school stuff.

P: Yeah.

C: When you were on the Honors Team, I imagine that there were times when you could have talked to your friends, but you didn't.

P: Yeah, I wasn't talking as much then as I do now.

C: So, what you are saying is, you were able to control your talking to the point where you were able to be on the Honors Team and still be with your friends at the same time.

P: Yeah.

C: How did you figure out how to do that?

Mindmapping solutions:

P: When I talked to my friends, then I was at lunch, in the hallways, and in related arts.

C: Ahh. So, you figured out you can save your talk for the hallways and lunchtime and related arts. Did someone teach you that?

P: Yeah, they told me that talk was for the hallways, for lunch, and for related arts, instead of in the classroom, 'cause when you are in the classroom, you got work to do instead of talking.

C: So, what's it going to take for you to be able to do that again?

P: Just save my talking for the hallways and related arts instead of talking in class and just keep my eyes on my book and pull up my grades.

C: How are you going to manage to make that happen for yourself? What's it going to take for you to do that?

P: Don't talk. Just don't talk at all. Only when the teacher asks you a question.

(Scaling)

C: Okay. Gosh, you know the answer. You've got the solutions. You know the solutions. Let me ask you this question: On a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 being your attitude just stinks and your behavior is down at the bottom, to a 10 being your miracle has happened and all these things you described were going on for you. So you don't have any problem with your attitude or behavior at all. Where do you think you are right now, between 0 and 10?

P: I'm around a 5.

C: You're around a 5? That means you have already started to move in that direction of a 10.

P: Yeah.

C: Now that's a big jump from a 0 to a 5. How have you gotten yourself to a 5?

P: I've started now.

C: Is that right? What did you start doing now?

P: Doing my work now instead of talking. Of my assignments, I only have three more problems to do.

C: So, what do you have to do to get a 6?

P: I'm going to talk less. Get my work done, and when my work is done, then I can talk.

C: Okay, so you'd be finishing your work, then you could talk.

P: Yeah.

(Flagging the minefield)

C: Hey, I bet there's going to be some temptations though, while you are doing your work, to start talking. How are you going to not let those temptations take over to where you start talking? What are you going to do when someone starts talking to you while you are still doing your work?

P: I'll just ignore them.

C: Hmm. Just like that. You can do that?

P: Yeah.

C: Really? That works?

P: Yeah. It works. Or I just tell them to leave me alone.

C: So, that would do it, getting to a 6, you want to finish your work first in class and that would tell you that you are on task.

P: Yeah.

C: I can't think of any other questions I need to ask you. Do you have any for me?

P: No.

C: Well then, I'm going to take a few minutes to think about what we talked about so I can write you the message we talked about. While I'm gone, perhaps you might want to think about what helped you the most in our session.

Summary

This chapter has presented a complete first interview demonstrating the application of the steps in SFBC. The case included prompts to assist you in associating process with content and provided an opportunity to practice taking notes in order to develop a message for the student. Messages include a task that is to be completed between sessions and addressed in a subsequent meeting. The next chapter discusses the components of second and subsequent interviews using the SFBC approach with students.

Practice Exercise

Take a few minutes to write a message to Pedro, and compare it with the following one.

Message

(Counselor writes this out by hand, photocopies it, and gives a copy to the student to take home)

Compliments

I'm real impressed with how smart you are, with your ability to know what it is you have to do. I am really impressed with how much you care about improving your attitude and your behavior in school. Your efforts today in not throwing a fit with your teacher when she reminded you about your work demonstrate your ability to control yourself. I'm also amazed with your creativity in figuring out a way to at least let yourself know that you know the answers to your teacher's questions even if you're not called on. Your thoughts about not wanting to be suspended show that you respect your mom, grandparents, and yourself a whole lot. Being on the Honors Team in September shows that you know what it takes to be successful, by doing your work and saving your talking time for the lunchroom, the halls, and in related arts and still being able to hang with your friends. You know what to do and how to do it.

Bridging Statement

Because of your desire to improve in school,

Task

I want you to notice the times and what you are doing to move you up to a 6 this week.

5

Conducting Subsequent Sessions

Students returning for second or subsequent interviews already have been assigned to continue doing things that are working or to notice what's better in their lives. Follow-up meetings begin with the premise that students have continued this focus between interviews and have observed positive things that may have gone unrecognized otherwise. I have found that most students report positive changes, and those who report that no progress has occurred do, with further solution-focused exploration, identify at least minimal change. Some clients may not want to admit progress; however, because this approach emphasizes assets, students are more likely to acknowledge growth.

Following a well-organized process is just as important for subsequent sessions as it is for the first meeting. A sequence known as EARS guides the second and subsequent sessions (Berg, 1994). EARS is an acronym for

*E*licit what's better,
*A*mplify the effects of what's better,
*R*einforce how these changes were brought about, and
Start over again, discovering additional successes.

After using the EARS process to review instances of success or improvement, scaling is used to evaluate progress toward students' goals in counseling. Students and counselors decide mutually whether additional counseling is needed. Second and subsequent interviews conclude with a message, just as in the first interview.

Subsequent Session Components

Eliciting

To draw out the differences or positive changes that have occurred, ask, "What's better or different since the last time we met?" This resembles the initial session when the counselor asks about instances of success or exceptions to problems as a way to explore overlooked resources.

Students may indicate that things are different but not necessarily better. As the differences are explored, pay careful attention to signs of any improvement even remotely connected to students' goals. As these successes are identified, the EARS process is initiated. Appropriate questions for this stage are similar to those used when exploring exceptions or instances of success in the first session. After clarifying students' unrecognized success, next facilitate the amplifying, reinforcing, and starting over phases of the EARS method.

Some students will report that nothing is better or different. When this occurs, acknowledge students' comments while listening for

even slight indications of things being better or not quite as bad as before. Inquiring about segments of time (e.g., the past several days, yesterday, today, in the past hour) when things may have been a little better or not as bad helps students identify moments of success. The following leads are effective in facilitating this:

Were things bad every minute of every day all week?

Tell me about the times that things were not quite as bad as other times?

What was going on with you when things weren't quite as bad?

How were you different when it wasn't nearly as bad?

I'm guessing that if you think about that for a few minutes, you may be able to come up with something that was better or different.

Perhaps if you thought about what may have happened just today, you may be able think of something to tell me.

Who might have noticed something better or different with you since we last met?

What do you think they would have seen in you that would have told them some changes were going on with you?

The following case example demonstrates reframing "nothing is different or better" responses into the recognition that things are in fact better (S = Student; C = Counselor).

C: What's better or different from when we saw each other last time?

S: Nothing, I had the same kind of week I usually have.

C: I have a hunch that during your usual week, there were some instances when things might have been a little better for you or maybe even not quite as bad.

S: I can't think of any.

C: Well, how about today, tell me about something that was better or different today!

S: Nothing really.

C: How about within the last hour before you came to see me?

S: You know, something was different last period in the lunchroom.

C: What was that?

S: They have this rule that you're not suppose to run in the lunchroom. Well, I ran in the lunchroom today, and the teacher told me to come back and walk, and I did.

C: Was that different for you?

S: Yeah.

C: How was it different?

S: I usually keep on running and get in trouble.

C: So, today was different for you, and it sounds like it's something that you said last week that you wanted to improve by following directions.

Through persistent questioning focused on specific segments of time, the counselor was able to elicit instances of success that had been unrecognized.

There may be times when students claim that things are actually worse than they reported in the previous meeting. When this surfaces, counselors "listen for better" and also use interventions that help students recognize the coping skills that keep their situations from being even worse than they are. This builds on the assumption that things could be worse and that students are using their resources to keep things from deteriorating even further. Identifying how students are coping suggests solutions.

When students report things are declining, ask, "How come things aren't worse than they are?" Their answers help determine how they prevented things from completely falling apart. Capitalizing on instances of success in the midst of slippages can turn unpleasant experiences into moments of hope and triumph. Identifying some things that are better permits you to proceed with the EARS process.

Amplifying

The amplifying component of EARS investigates the ripple effect as changes in students' behaviors prompt change in others. Elaborating on the reciprocity evoked by their efforts empowers students to recognize the impact of their actions, which in turn reinforces students to take on further challenges that may not have been attempted otherwise. This component is similar to the reciprocal-relationship effect questions described in Chapter 2.

At the close of the second counseling session, a fifth-grade boy in a behavior disorder class stated,

> I like coming here because I don't get a chance to talk to anyone about all the good things I do and how my friends and teacher act with me when I do these good things. That helps me even do more good stuff.

Reinforcing

Reinforcement or cheerleading, the third step in the sequence, is already familiar to most counselors. As students discover and are supported in their efforts to effect positive changes in their lives, mindmaps form to help them with future situations. Because this part of the interview resembles the instances-exceptions and cheerleading sections in Chapter 3, those techniques will not be reviewed again. The entire process is recycled again by *starting over* through eliciting what's better.

Scaling

After completing the EARS sequence, by using previously described scaling techniques, students' progress from the past meeting can be evaluated. Counseling is not an exact science. The field has lacked a means to measure its effectiveness; however, with scaling techniques, this is feasible. Students' ratings on a 0 to 10 scale yield scores that reflect, in most cases, an upward, positive trend.

Counselors should not remind students of their previous scores before asking them to rate where they are at the moment with their goal. Students need to respond as objectively as possible without being influenced by their earlier ratings.

Ratings That Show Improvement

To begin this aspect of subsequent sessions, counselors ask students to estimate where they are between 0 and 10 in reaching their goal. Counselors apply the same procedures used with scaling described in Chapter 3. Students are asked to identify what they have done to make progress, how others have reacted to them, and how they have managed to make this happen for themselves. Many of their responses to these queries will replicate what has already been said in the EARS sequence; therefore, redundant material need not be discussed in detail. Acknowledging, supporting, and cheerleading are in order here. Soliciting details about students' progress on their scales may elicit new information revealing successes not previously mentioned. This presents another opportunity to process the components of successful efforts. As in their initial scaling in the first interview, students are asked what they will have to do to move up 10% on the scale. Flagging the minefield may also be used at this point in the interview.

Ratings That Indicate No Improvement or a Decline

Students may report they are at the same place or worse on their scale than they were in the previous session. Counselors using the solution-focused approach must always keep in mind that instances of success or exception to problems are constantly occurring if we pay close attention. Even in the midst of things being worse, there are moments when they are not quite as bad. And regardless of how bad things are, they could be worse. What students do to deintensify problems suggests they have coping skills. Helping clients recognize these skills also helps them identify solutions.

Scaling can be adapted to focus on other aspects of achieving goals as well. Asking students to rate from 0 to 10 their level of confidence

that they will reach their goals is another scaling technique. Counselors also can ask students how their teachers, parents, friends, or others would rate them on the scale to check how they sense others perceive them.

Assessing the Need for Further Counseling and Writing a Message

Before counselors write a message for students, counselors ask students if they are satisfied with what has been happening with their counseling. If they are not satisfied, counselors help them explore what would help as a way to clarify the direction to be taken if further meetings are desired. Inquiries such as the following help students identify when it's time to stop counseling.

- How will you know you're done with counseling?
- What will you be doing on your own that will tell you that you don't need to see me anymore?
- When you have finished counseling, what will your teachers (parents) say you will be doing differently?
- How many more times do you think we need to meet until you're completely satisfied with counseling?
- Reaching what number on your scale will be enough for you to say you have been successful in here? So, how many more meetings will that take? (Keep in mind that estimates about the number of sessions can be amended as needed.)

After this issue is settled, counselors construct a message as in the initial interview.

A Second and Subsequent Session Interview Road Map

The road map shown in Figure 5.1 helps guide those new to the solution-focused approach. Placing a full-sized copy of this road map

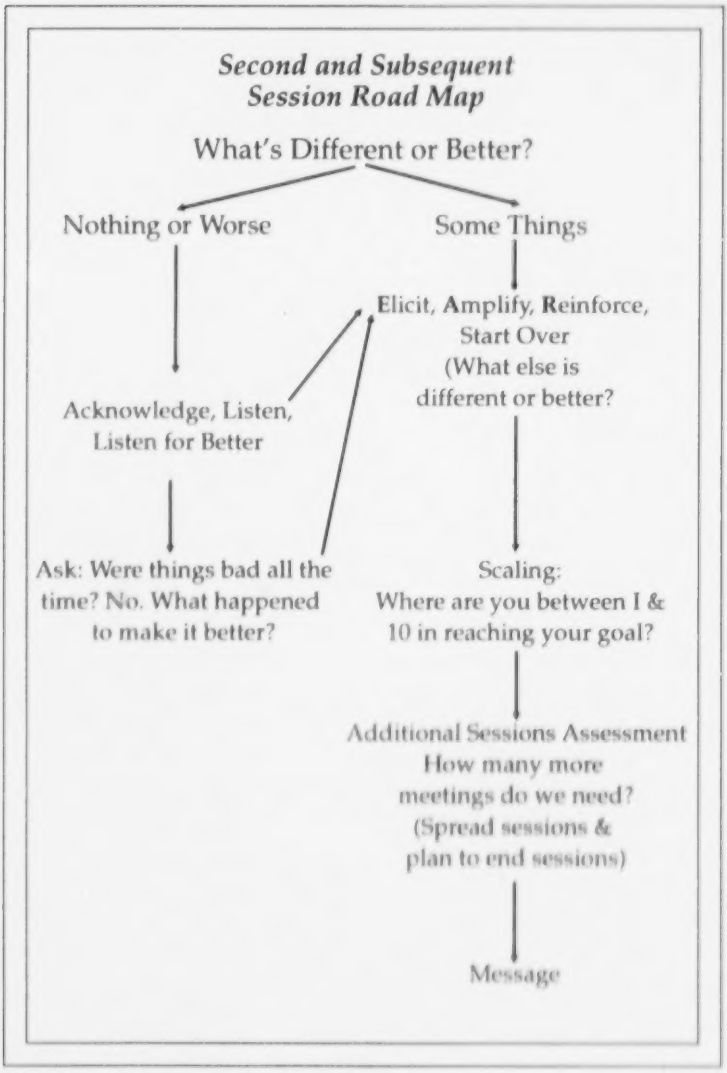

Figure 5.1. Subsequent Session Road Map
(This may be enlarged on a copier for easier use)

on one side of a bifold notepad for reference can help keep you on track.

Subsequent Sessions With Pedro

The follow-up session 1 week later with Pedro, whose first session was presented in the previous chapter, demonstrates procedures for subsequent sessions. Pedro reported that things had been better since his first counseling appointment. He indicated that he was now going to every class on time, kept his jacket in his locker, and began to do his work on entering his classes. He also reported that instead of roaming the halls, he would go straight back to class after going to the rest room. His grades and attitude about school had improved, and his teachers were now complimenting him on his progress. He also claimed that as a result of the changes he was making, he noticed that his teachers stopped picking on him and were nicer. This helped Pedro follow directions and comply with his teachers' requests.

When asked how he was able to make these changes happen, Pedro explained that he was able to remind himself that he didn't want any more referrals to the office and, if he cooperated with his teachers, his mother would no longer receive phone calls from school about his misbehaving. Moreover, he had decided to talk things through with other kids rather than hitting them. As a result, he got along better with them and with his teachers.

Pedro gave himself a rating of a 9 with respect to his confidence that he would continue to improve. He reported that to achieve a 10, he would finish all his schoolwork in class before talking to his friends, continue to go to every class on time, do all of his work, and listen to his teachers.

The third meeting with Pedro was conducted 2 weeks after the second session. He reported he was listening to his teachers, turning in his school work, going to class on time, talking only after doing his work with his teacher's permission, and avoiding fights by telling himself to forget about it. As a result of Pedro's continued improvement in school, he was put back on the honors team. Because Pedro

decided he could continue to be successful on his own, no other sessions were scheduled unless he requested them. During the last 5 months of the school year, Pedro received only one referral to the office. Prior to counseling, he had weekly or biweekly referrals. His improved behavior continued throughout the summer and the following school year.

Summary

The belief that students have the resources to make things better for themselves is the pervasive theme in subsequent SFBC sessions. Students are asked to identify improvements since last meeting and the methods they have applied to create these positive changes. Scaling is used to measure growth and provide guidance for further progress. Meetings conclude by assessing the needs for additional interviews and preparing and sharing the counselor's message. Follow-up sessions using the traditional solution-focused format as presented are scheduled if needed.

The next chapter highlights several modifications and tools that increase the efficiency and applicability of the solution-focused approach. Referral forms focused on desired changes, modified 15-minute to 20-minute sessions, and group applications are among the options presented in the next chapter.

6

Expanding Solution-Focused Concepts

Solution-focused concepts can be useful in other school counseling situations as well, as discussed in this chapter. Kral (1994) developed an abbreviated version of this approach in which interviews are initiated with scaling. Beginning a counseling session with this part of the model shortens it from approximately 40 minutes to 15 or 20 minutes. I have found this approach effective with children as young as 6 years old who have difficulty conceptualizing miracles and with those students who have difficulty identifying a goal for counseling.

Another approach is being used to assist teachers who refer students for counseling. Dr. Lou Bryant (personal communication, September 15, 1994), a practicing school counselor in St. Louis, Missouri, has found solution-oriented referral forms to be helpful in directing

teachers' attention to what's working for students despite their troubles. The referral form also helps teachers see how they contribute to students' successes. This triggers a reciprocal pattern—teachers' perceptions of students are affected, causing changes in their reactions, which in turn lead to changes in students' behavior.

Whereas the brief nature of SFBC enables counselors to see more students for counseling, adapting this method for use with groups expands efficacy even more. Use of solution-focused counseling groups in schools recently has been reported by LaFountain et al. (1996). Elementary school counselors also have experienced success with SFBC methods in groups, as discussed later in this chapter.

The 20-Minute Session

Circumstances often arise during the day when a 40-minute counseling session is just not feasible. Students and counselors' schedules may limit the time for counseling contact. Some teachers may not be willing to allow their students to miss an entire class for counseling. Many students are only willing to see their counselors during their 20-minute lunch break at school. Short attention spans of some students may restrict follow-through with the complete model. This is particularly true of younger children in the earlier elementary grades. Because of their inability to concentrate for the long periods of time required in counseling, the traditional solution-focused approach may not be appropriate.

Scaling

Faced with these obstacles, Kral (1994) found a remedy in an abbreviated application of SFBC that appears to be effective with students at all grade levels. Counselors initiate this shortened interview by asking students to rate where they are now on a scale from 0 to 100, with 100 representing their lives being perfect for them and 0 representing when things are the worst they can ever be. For elementary school students, the 0 is defined as the saddest they could

ever be and the 100 as the happiest they could possibly be, excluding receiving a gift. Receiving gifts is excluded because it depends on circumstances outside the individual rather than reflecting actions the student might take. Kral (1994) expanded the scale from 10 to 100 because he found that many students responded to the 10-point scale with fractional responses, such as 4½. With the expanded range, students instead gave responses of 45, which made it easier to measure smaller degrees of success. The extremes are stated so that worst-case and best-case scenarios may not have been experienced by students. With a worst-case scenario, students are helped to recognize the strengths they have used to keep from hitting bottom. At the other end of the continuum, students see that by using their strengths, they can achieve beyond the best it has been so far. A "sad face" to "smiley face" continuum can also be used with younger children. Here are examples of leads that counselors can use to initiate this approach:

- You're looking down in the dumps because of this situation that you have come to see me for. If we had a scale of 0 to 100, with 0 being the lowest you could picture yourself being and 100 being when things would be perfect for you, where do you think you are right now?
- You don't seem to be sure what you want to accomplish in counseling. Perhaps it would help if you were to rate yourself on a scale of 0 to 100, with 0 being the saddest you could ever be and 100 being the happiest you could ever be, except for getting something. Where would you put yourself right now?
- So, you have been sent to me and you're not sure why, but you do know that school isn't going as well as you would like it to go. Maybe to get us started, you may want to consider this. If you had a scale with numbers from 0 to 100, and 0 is when things here at school were at rock bottom or the worst you could imagine and 100 is when things are ideal or the best you could ever imagine them to be for you at school, where do you think you are right now?

Determining the Highest Rating Achieved

After students select a rating, they are asked to assess the highest score they have ever achieved. Two possibilities exist: (a) in the past, they have had a higher score than at present or (b) their present rating is the highest it's ever been.

Higher Past Ratings

When higher ratings are reported in the past, students reveal to counselors and to themselves the presence of solutions that are not being applied. The same types of questions as described in Chapter 3 are implemented—questions that identify instances of success or exceptions to problems. Counselors ask students to determine what was different between then and now and what students were doing before to bring about their higher ratings. The following counselor interventions illustrates this:

- From what you're saying, you are now at 56, and you have been as high as 75. What was going on with you when you were at 75?
- How is that different from what is going on right now?
- So, you think because you were being monitored closely, things were better. I bet there were times when you weren't being monitored closely that you still were doing a 75. Isn't that right?
- And how did you manage to keep yourself at a 75 then, even when you weren't being watched so closely?
- That's fantastic that you could have slacked off and you didn't, just by telling yourself that.

When the Present Rating Is the Highest

If the present rating is the highest it has ever been, students are asked what is the lowest they have ever been. The purpose is to determine how students have improved to where they are now. Exploring the differences between their actions related to their lower scores and their behaviors associated with higher ratings helps stu-

dents chart how they have used their resources to achieve their highest rating and provides them with tools to advance even further. This is demonstrated in the following interventions:

- What you're telling me is that right now you're at 43 and that is the highest you have ever been. I'm also thinking that you have been lower than 43, and I'm curious—how far down have you been prior to your working so hard to get where you are today?
- So, you have been at an 18 and now you're at a 43. What did you do to move yourself up to where you are now?
- How did you make that happen for yourself? I know that had to be real hard, knowing all that you were going through at that time.

Moving to a Higher Level

For those students who have previously had higher ratings, counselors focus on how these students will again move to their highest level. Counselors ask what students have to do and how they can apply their resources to their present situation to achieve success as before. For those presently at their highest rating, inquiring how their past successes can be used to improve even more helps students move up the scale. Here are examples of counselor interventions that facilitate this:

- You are at a 56 right now, and you have been as high as a 75; I'm wondering how you can get yourself back up to that 75?
- What are you going to have to do to return to your highest rating?
- You're the highest you have ever been, and you know what you have done to get there; what do you think you need to do to move up just a little bit higher?
- Recognizing all the hard work it took to get to where you are, what's it going to take for you gain a few more points on your scale?

Message-Task

Kral (1994) suggests counselors assign a task to conclude the abbreviated session. Tasks are similar to those issued in the message writing discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. Homework tasks are vague. They encourage students to notice what's better, to do the things that have worked, to pretend they are 10% better, and so forth. Here are some examples of tasks:

- Begin to do those things you have done in the past that have proven to work.
- Notice what you're doing that tells you that you are doing better.
- Pretend you've improved 10% by doing those things that will make this happen for you.

I find that writing a very brief message and giving it to students is a more effective way to reinforce students taking actions. With the brevity of the interview, fewer notes are taken and less is said; therefore, the message is shorter, like the interview. The message is constructed using the same format described in Chapters 3 and 4. If time permits, it works well to deliver the entire message to students; however, assigning tasks by themselves also can be effective.

A Case of Abbreviated Solution-Focused Counseling

The following case with Lincoln, an eight-year-old third-grader referred to me for counseling by his mother because of his father's recent death, illustrates the abbreviated version of the solution-focused approach.

As the meeting began, Lincoln was asked to identify where he was on the 100-point scale. After briefly discussing his rating, he indicated his lowest score was a 0, just a few months ago when his dad had died (he began to cry while recalling this). After I made several empathetic comments, he was asked where he was on the scale now.

Lincoln responded he was at 10. When queried how he got from a 0 to a 10, after some thought he responded, "I remember things like going camping and Disney World with my dad and the good times we had." He also recalled the one time he had briefly talked with his mother about how he missed his dad (he hadn't discussed his dad's death with anyone else).

As he continued, I asked him to identify where he was at that moment on the scale. He replied he was at 20. When queried how he was able to move up 10 points in just 5 minutes, he responded, "Talking about my dad when I think about missing him." To help Lincoln apply the resources he had just discovered, I asked Lincoln what he would have to do to move up to a 30. He replied, "I could talk to my mom about my dad after dinner when I need to."

The following brief message was given to Lincoln:

> I am really impressed with how aware you are of your feelings about your dad. You know it's okay to feel sad that he died, but you also know that it is important to talk about him with your mother when you become sad. Remembering the good times you had with him when you went to Disney World and camping helps pick you up.
>
> To keep you on target to moving to a 30, notice what you are doing this week to make things better for yourself.

For his second session, Lincoln appeared in my office with a smile on his face. When asked the reason he was so happy, he responded that he was seeing me and getting out of class. When I asked, "What's better this week?" he reported he was at 100 on his scale. He stated he had been having regular conversations with his mother about his dad. He indicated his mother was also happier as a result of his talking to her about his father. Lincoln also reported that he had earned free play time at school every day during the past week. When asked if that was different, he replied, "It sure is, because this was the first time all year that I earned play time." When queried about how this was different and how he made that happen, he responded that he raised his hand before answering the teacher's questions and he stayed in his seat until the teacher gave him permission to get up. He also listened and did what his teacher asked him to do.

In the third and last session, 2 weeks after the second session, Lincoln reported continued improvement. His conversations with his mother about his dad continued but with less frequency because he felt less sad. Lincoln also was improving in school. In addition to his previous changes, he began to walk in straight lines in the hall as the teacher requested, remained in his seat on the school bus, and started hanging around students who were less rowdy. This led to fewer episodes of trouble and more free play time.

30-Second Counseling

I have found that students have an uncanny ability to remember their scaled ratings and what these numbers represent behaviorally. Therefore, counselors can offer quick, 30-second pep sessions while passing students in the hall, at the bus, or in the lunchroom by inquiring verbally or nonverbally where students are on their scales at the moment. Thumbs up or hand gestures reflecting "okay" from counselors also can show students that they are being acknowledged for their efforts. Nonverbal expressions that support students to move higher on their scales also can be given by pointing to students and then up toward the ceiling. This private "conversation" illustrates a bond between counselors and students in which only they know what is being communicated. If a significant drop in a rating is noted, this signals to counselors that an appointment may be needed to get students back on track.

Counseling Referral Form

Another helpful tool is a solution-based counseling form developed by Lou Bryant (personal communication, September 15, 1994) to be used by teachers and administrators to refer students to counseling (see Table 6.1). The form helps those initiating referrals to identify specific behaviors to be addressed and to notice when some parts of desired behaviors already have occurred. This section also implies that the person making the referral may be doing something to make things better, and it alerts the person to notice what that may

TABLE 6.1 Solution-Focused Brief Counseling Referral Form

Student's Name_____ Grade _____

Date _____

Counselor _____

Person Referring _____

1. What, in your opinion, will this student be doing differently (goal) when the problem(s) for which he or she was referred is solved?

   What would be evidence of a solid first step toward meeting this goal?

2. Indicate times when parts of the goal are achieved.

How might you explain the difference?

3. On a scale of 0-10 (0 lowest to 10 highest),

   a. Where would you rate the present behavior of this student?
   b. What is the highest rating this student has reached, in your observation?
   c. Rate your level of optimism about the possibility of change for this student.

be. This section of the form actually helps those making referrals to examine their own behaviors and the positive effects on students being referred. The third and final question on the form enables referring parties to rate students' present behaviors and note past successes. The tenor of the form is to provide counselors information about possible goals for students. However, an even greater benefit stems from helping referring parties notice successes and what is working for students and for themselves.

Solution-Focused Group and Classroom Counseling

Solution-focused concepts can be applied to group settings as well. The group application resembles family counseling in that students provide feedback to each other based on their observed interactions in class.

Group Counseling

The following description shows an elementary counselor's (Margaret Cavitt, personal communication, February 15, 1996) adaptation of SFBC to a small-group setting. The group was established in response to a first-grade teacher's difficulty with a group of five boys with behavior problems. The group was scheduled to meet for 30 minutes once a week for 6 weeks.

First Meeting

Students are asked why they thought they were asked to participate in the group. Group members identify their behaviors in and out of class that are a problem for them and for their teacher. After making a commitment to learn how to improve their behaviors, students are asked to identify what their behaviors would look like if by magic their problem had disappeared. Furthermore, students are asked who would notice and what they would see as being different in them once the problem had disappeared. Each member responds to this question while others in the group are encouraged to contribute what they would see them do differently as well.

After all members have had the opportunity to respond, they are asked to rate themselves on a scale indicating where they are from 0 to 10. A 0 represents never doing any of the behaviors just described, and 10 indicates the described behaviors are happening all the time. Students also are asked the reasons they have rated themselves as they did. Following their self-ratings, students are asked to make a promise to themselves, in front of a mirror and the group, about the things they would do to move up one number on the scale. The counselor records each student's promises on an index card that is photocopied and then given to the student. The group is then dismissed.

Second Meeting and the Four Subsequent Meetings

Students are surveyed concerning improvements since their last meeting. Group members are encouraged to describe things they have noticed were better about the behavior of each of the other

members during the week. Then, they are asked to rate themselves on the 0-to-10 scale. This is followed by cheerleading and detailing how members made the changes. Students reflect on the effects their improved behaviors had on others and on themselves. If reported ratings regress, students are supported for their efforts to prevent their scores from going even lower, and they are asked what they would do differently next time to move higher on their scales.

Members discuss new promises they would like to make to themselves that would raise their ratings one more place on the scale. Students return to the mirror to make promises to themselves, and the counselor records, copies, and distributes the revised promises to the children.

Before the meeting concludes, members are asked to share with each other the improvements they have seen and expect to continue to see in one another. The group is then dismissed. Sessions three through six follow the same format.

The teacher who referred the students for counseling reported positive results in the students' behavior. The five students improved so much that they had each been recognized as student of the week in their class at least once during the term. Because of the counselor's success with this and other solution-based groups, the school principal has requested she spend more of her time doing counseling.

Classroom Counseling

A solution-focused classroom counseling program was implemented by Jed Turner (personal communication, April 2, 1995), a counselor from Liberty Elementary School in Oldham County, Kentucky. He sought to assist teachers with fourth-grade and fifth-grade students who were not getting along with each other, failing to become a cohesive unit, and not taking responsibility for their behaviors. The class had become disruptive, and learning was being compromised. Several teachers specifically asked for his help, saying they were at their wit's end and didn't know what to do.

In response to this request, Turner developed a five-session classroom counseling plan adapted from the SFBC approach he had been

using with individual students. The first two meetings, of about an hour to an hour and a half each, are conducted on two successive days. The third meeting of about 60 minutes is conducted 2 or 3 days after the second meeting, and the final two meetings of 30 to 45 minutes each are held 1 and 2 weeks later. The following describes the strategies Turner used to implement solution-focused classroom counseling in one of his early uses of it.

First Meeting

The first session opened with an explanation of why the counselor was there and an overview of the five meetings in which they would work together to solve the problems of the class. Ground rules were established for participation (as examples, everyone had the right to speak, there would be no judging of what others say, students or the teacher would not be identified by name when describing situations but referred to in general terms such as "a kid in here," "some students in this class," or "the teacher"). Comments were recorded on newsprint and saved for later use. The teacher participated in the process along with the students.

The meeting began with students describing their perceptions of the problems in their class. Before the first meeting, the counselor alerted the teacher that she might hear comments that may not be complimentary and solicited her willingness to participate. Before starting the session, the counselor reminded students of their teacher's commitment to making things better by inviting the counselor to help them resolve their difficulties. The counselor emphasized the teacher's willingness to hear students' views of her even if they were not positive.

The counselor initiated the session by asking, "What is the problem in this class?" All comments were recorded on newsprint. Every student was encouraged to participate. After all the responses were recorded, the counselor explained that there were always positives along with negatives in all situations, and, therefore, they were to think about the positive things in class, so they could discuss them when the counselor returned the following day. This assignment concluded the session.

Second Meeting (the Next Day)

The meeting began with students and the teacher identifying the positive things observed in the class. In this case, students' responses included that the teacher was fair, the teacher did listen and try to help, and some people didn't criticize or make fun of others (negative goals were not reframed into positive goals at this time). During this sequence, students were asked to identify when they observed the positive things occurring.

Next, the counselor asked a version of the miracle question to elicit what the classroom would look like if all their problems were gone. "Let's pretend that this chalk (pointer, ruler) has magical powers, and when I wave it over the classroom, a miracle will take place and everything will be as you want it to be in here." (The generic miracle question could also be used.) As students responded to the miracle question, negative goals were reframed into positive goals. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, the specific details that described a picture of each goal were clarified and listed on newsprint.

Students usually claimed the miracle was impossible to achieve. The counselor agreed that it's impossible to have 100% of everything and be perfect; however, the goal was to work toward getting some of their miracle to happen. This was followed by the question, "Is everybody in the class willing to make that commitment?"

A form of scaling was used at this point. Students held up fingers on their raised hands to indicate the extent of their commitment to improve. No fingers represented no commitment at all; five fingers meant they would be willing to do almost anything to make the miracle happen. Barriers to students being more committed were explored with questions such as, "What's keeping you from being committed?" Or, "What will have to happen for you to be more committed—just one finger more?"

The second meeting concluded with a homework task. The students and teacher were to write what they were going to do to make their miracle happen. The counselor emphasized the importance of students' focusing on what they would do and not what others were doing or not doing. It was important that students remain focused on what they would do and take responsibility for their behaviors.

(Unless this is emphasized, students tend to focus on others' behaviors.) Referring to the posted chart listing the positive things that were identified at the start of the second meeting (exceptions) reminded students that some of these things were already happening. The homework assignment was to be completed before the counselor returned to the class several days later.

Third Meeting (2 or 3 Days Later)

Students read their homework assignments aloud. Then the counselor asked the class to identify when some of these instances of success occurred during the past several days. As these occasions were noted, the counselor cheerled and helped students detail how they made these events happen.

A line with numbers ranging from 0 to 10 was drawn on the board, with 0 representing when the class was at its worst and 10 being the miracle day. Students were asked to rate where they thought the class was right now and what they have done to move up to that rating from a 0. (If students' ratings vary, their scores can be averaged to determine a group rating.) Students were then asked what they would have to do to move up the scale a point and how they would make this happen. What differences would the teacher notice that would tell her that things had improved 10%? The teacher also gave input during the entire sequence.

Next, the counselor gave a task. Students and their teacher were (a) to notice between now and the next meeting in a week the things that they and others in class were doing to move up one number on the scale and (b) to compliment each other when they observed those positive things happening. This activity was designed to initiate a change from a class climate that was negative and critical to positive and complimentary.

Fourth Meeting (1 Week Later)

The session started by surveying where students perceived the class to be on their scale and what had happened during the week that had led them to this rating. The counselor cheerled and complimented students' efforts and elicited the details of how students

managed to cause these changes to happen for themselves. They were again asked to identify what they would need to do to advance another 10% on their scale. The session, which lasted about 30 to 40 minutes, concluded in the same manner as the third meeting—with an assignment to notice and compliment one another when things were getting better so these successes could be discussed during the final meeting.

Fifth Meeting (2 Weeks Later)

The format for this session was the same as for the previous meeting. At the end of this meeting, the counselor assigned the class to continue to do those things that were working and would move it on a path to reach a 10.

Results

The class continued to improve without further counselor intervention. The teacher was extremely pleased with the results of the classroom counseling session. Not only were things better for her and for the students, she also had learned from students' feedback how to be a more effective teacher. Probably most important, the teacher was now thinking solutions instead of problems and was looking for successes to highlight rather than failures. This was both empowering and a boost to her students' self-esteem.

After hearing about the success of this solution-focused classroom counseling, several other teachers requested this experience for their classes. They enjoyed similar results.

Summary

Even when time restrictions limit counseling sessions to 30 minutes or less, an abbreviated form of SFBC has yielded positive results. Effectiveness has been enhanced by using a referral form that helps the referring party identify the specific changes students will make and have already made to improve their situations. Last, solution-focused principles have been applied to group and

classroom counseling situations. The solution-focused methods have enabled school counselors to serve even more students efficiently and effectively.

Final Thoughts

In closing, it seems appropriate to highlight the unique advantages of SFBC. Although it is not the answer for every client, the approach is remarkably versatile—it can work for any number of problems or diagnoses. Its versatility stems from the simple fact that the goal in counseling is the client's goal, not the counselor's, parent's, teacher's, or principal's goal. So long as clients can be helped to identify what they want to achieve, regardless of the nature of the difficulty, the solution-focused approach can work.

The solution-focused approach has the added advantage of being quick. Because the effects can be observed soon after counseling begins, clients experience a heightened sense of motivation to follow through with behavioral change. The spin-offs of improved relationships with family, teachers, and friends add to the student's motivation to make positive choices.

This approach is also unique in recognizing the power of focus. It acknowledges that when counseling focuses on problems—describing them, their frequency, their impact—clients typically tend to continue having those problems. And when counseling focuses on solutions—what works, how it works, and when—clients tend to experience more solutions to their difficulties. The bottom line: You get more of whatever you focus on. This simple tenet of SFBC is perhaps its most powerful.

I hope this book has inspired you to want to try this approach with your students. I encourage you to make the effort. You will most likely experience bumps along the road to being an effective solution-focused brief counselor. Reviewing sections of the book that address your stuck points or attending workshops on this approach will help fine tune your efforts.[1]

Over the past 3 years, I have seen the effectiveness of this approach with children and youth in school settings. The exciting challenge

ahead is to share the solution-focused approach with the school counseling community so that more counselors and students alike will share in the inspiring successes that will result from keeping focused on solutions.

Note

1. Readers interested in workshop information can contact me by e-mail at gbskla@ulkyvm.louisville.edu or call me at (502) 852-0632.

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